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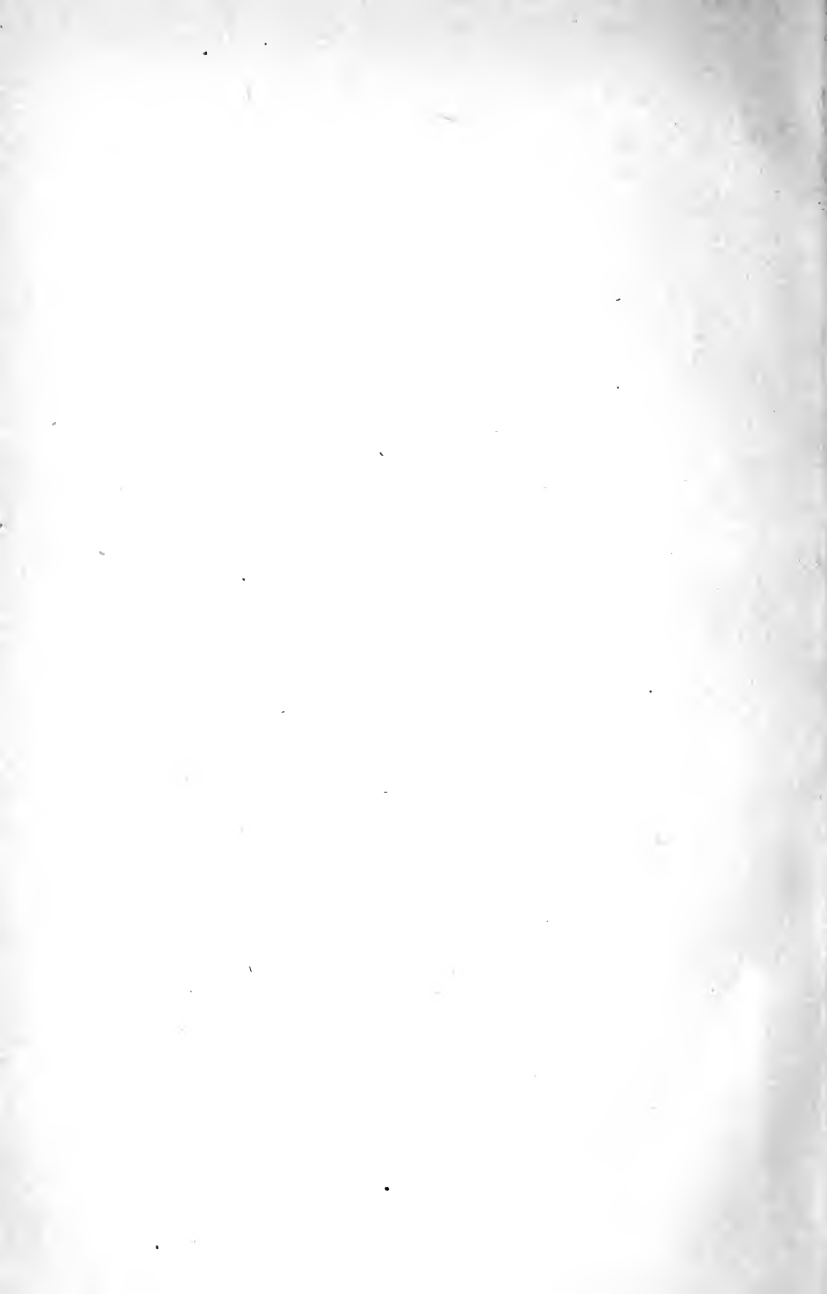
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'The Reverend Paul was knocked headlong into the arms of Bushell senior.'

JOSEPH'S COAT

BY

DAVID CHRISTIE MURRAY

AUTHOR OF 'A LIFE'S ATONEMENT' ETC.



With TWELVE ILLUSTRATIONS by FRED. BARNARD

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.

London

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ILLUSTRATIONS TO VOL. I.

THE REVEREND PAUL WAS KNOCKED HEAD-

LONG INTO THE ARMS OF BUSHELL, SENIOR *Frontispiece*

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JOSEPH'S COAT

PROLOGUE.

CHAPTER I.

OLD JOE and young Joe, sturdy sire and lissome son, trudged through the dust together—old Joe bent down a little earthwards, and going rather like a carthorse; young Joe with his head well up, and stepping like a hunter that can carry weight. I see them in my mind's eye, as in a picture. Old Joe, dressed in white moleskin of such weight and thickness that he looked like a polar bear, with his gnarled hands hanging lazily and solidly as if each carried a hundredweight which his gigantic strength made light of,—blue-eyed, grey-whiskered, with deep

blue scars like tattoo marks all over his face,—tramped on serenely, pipe in mouth. Young Joe, with a sprouting bit of whisker, downy as yet, and yellow like a callow fledgling's feathers; blue-eyed, broad-shouldered, lithe and limber, went springily at the old man's side. Young Joe was dressed like a gentleman of that period (it is nearly thirty years since the father and son walked side by side for the last time), and he and the old man made altogether a fine contrast. Old Joe was stolidly genial, as befitted a man who had beaten the world hollow, and now took his ease with dignity. Young Joe had something of an aggressive air, or carried at least a sort of warning in his face—*nemo me impune lacessit*. This warning was perhaps a trifle sulky, as was natural, all things considered. How rich old Joe might be no man knew, but he clung to the dress and habits of his youth—dressed like a working miner on holiday, lived like a miner, looked like a miner, and was proud to talk like one. Young Joe, bred at a distant 'college school,' and returning home only at holiday times, resented these

things. His speech was of the finest, his clothes were of the best—the son of a baronet was his chosen chum, he had yearnings towards the world of fashion, and believed that he could shine in that bright sphere, if he had but a chance. Old Joe cared for none of those things, and, except for a certain sturdy self-possession, had no pride. He would have met the hereditary Autocrat of All the Russias with a sentiment of equality so natural that he would not have dreamed of formulating it even to himself. Young Joe formulated *his* beliefs in the equality of mankind daily, and, with a natural want of logic, resented with great *hauteur* the approach of any of his father's old and less prosperous companions. He himself was 'a man for a' that'—*cela va sans dire*—but 'for a' that and a' that,' the claims of one's social inferiors must be repelled and beaten down. He was the equal of any man above him, but no one below him had a right to a similar claim. This mental attitude is not uncommon.

Young Joe resented his name, and would have preferred Reginald, or Herbert, or Walter

or anything rather than Joseph, so easily susceptible of a vulgar abbreviation. He was not without pride in his father, but he resented the old man's clothes, and his house, and his speech. And, most bitterly and shamefacedly of all, he resented the spectacle he was now on his way to witness.

It was summer weather, in days when summer weather meant warmth and sunshine. There was sunshine even here, though the scene lay in the centre of the Black Country. It is pleasant to notice how nature has reasserted herself in that grimy province after all the scars which labour has left upon her. Labour has dug deep into her heart, and has rifled her very entrails, and has set upon her breast such burdens as Enceladus lay under. Yet, wheresoever you see her face, she smiles; wheresoever her busy hands can move, she weaves her spells. Tall purple foxgloves lined the road, and the hawthorns were white with blossom, and the lark shook with the delight of his own song a mile above the smoke wreaths. It was Sunday also, and the smoke wreaths were something

thinner and even fewer than they would have been on any other day in the seven. Old Joe had a little of the quiet Sabbath feeling on him. Young Joe, pridefully resenting all things, resented Sunday terribly because of the shame it brought him.

Father and son were on their way to listen to the most popular preacher of the time and neighbourhood. That preacher was a woman. Nay, the murder must out: that woman was Rebecca Bushell, old Joe's wife and young Joe's mother. On the subject of female preachers in general young Joe had incisive opinions, sharpened probably by some personal feeling. That his mother should preach, and be publicly advertised to preach, and that she should speak in public with no disguise of that picturesque and drawling accent which was her birthright, was an affliction which the lad's pride had borne with groaning this many a day. And now, worse than all, here was his mother—in combination with greasy-complexioned professionals, whom he knew, in seedy black and ties of dubious white, and roomy shoes topped by too-

visible stockings of white cotton, also dubious in tone—conducting a camp-meeting, advertised far and wide in flaring posters, and sure to bring, with crowds of the pious, countless railers, to many of whom he himself was known. The reader will understand the term ‘camp-meeting’ in a limited sense. It was a camp-meeting with no encampment, and lasted one day only.

As father and son walked together, there was heard suddenly the bray of a band, drowning the lark’s music, and far and wide the sound of the Hallelujah Chorus filled the fields. It was not ignobly played or sung, though band and choir alike needed a little fining here and there. The folk of the Black Country are essentially musical, and here they played and sang with all their heart and soul and lungs. There was a little admixture of strings with the wind instruments, and a tailor led the violins. ‘Now David,’ cried the drummer, as he grasped his sticks, ‘let thy elbow fly like a lamb’s tail!’ and David nodded to this encouragement, and led the way at a rattling pace. Whilst the band and choir were in the midst of

their fervour, the two late comers took their place at the edge of the vast crowd. There were some five-and-twenty thousand people present, and the gathering could scarcely fail to be impressive. The place of meeting had some advantages and some disadvantages. For one thing, the crowd was sundered by the waters of a canal ; but as a set-off against this, the lock, over which the platform was built, stood some ten or twelve feet above the hollow land in which the multitude had gathered, so that all could at least see the orators of the day. The platform was primitive but secure, and consisted of great beams of timber laid from wall to wall of the lock ; and in the centre was another smaller platform on which the more prominent of the promoters of the meeting were gathered. They were a rugged set for the most part, and the presence of one or two massive women added little refinement to this central knot. Mrs. Bushell sat in black silk—square, hard, uncompromising in face and figure—at the little unclothed deal table with red legs, on which were set a water-bottle,

a glass, a Bible, and a few scattered hymn-books. Young Joe, discerning here and there an acquaintance in the crowd, blushed at the figure on the platform and revolted at its presence there. One gentleman, the son of a neighbouring coal-owner, beholding young Joe, waited until he caught his eye, and then, from his coign of vantage near the lock gates, elaborately winked at him. At this and a slight backward motion of the head, indicating the chief personage on the platform, the youngster turned scarlet, but he held his head erect and felt savagely defiant—not least defiant, perhaps, of his mother and the prominence of her place. Old Joe, with his massive hands depending downwards, smoked his clay calmly at the edge of the crowd by his son's side. These *al-fresco* religious observances had one especial charm for the elder Bushell; they found room for a pipe; and without the soothing influence of his tube of clay, the old man found the best of sermons dull.

Young Joe's resentfulness of humour increased as he stood by his father's side. But

he was there to brave the whole thing out, and to show to his friends that he was not ashamed of his father and mother and their ways. But why, in the name of all things abominable, would his father insist on wearing moleskin clothing and on smoking a clay pipe at such a place and time? and why should his mother sit there, the centre of these vulgar orators, gazed at by all these vulgar eyes? He was not ashamed of them, he told himself. Was he not here by his own free will? He grew more and more wrathful and rebellious as he nursed these thoughts.

By-and-by, after the due introductory readings and prayers had been gone through, and when a hymn had been sung with rough and striking grandeur of tone, Mrs. Rebecca Bushell rose squarely up, and gave out her text and preached. I suppose that everybody who reads this will have some notion of what a revival sermon is like, and that there is therefore no need for me to set down Mrs. Bushell's utterances. The creed she unfolded was stern and ugly, though modified by some private

tenderness of her own, and young Joe knew well enough that much of the discourse was levelled at himself. The presence of her son gave her speech a passionate earnestness which it would otherwise have missed, and she preached at the crowd through him, and at him through the crowd. This also young Joe resented, and savagely endured. It came to an end at last, and twenty-five thousand pairs of lungs aided the band in giving breath to the Old Hundredth, which rolled its slow, grand stream of sound across the sunny fields, and was heard, soft and sweet with distance, in the Sabbath streets of the town a mile away.

The crowd broke into scattered sections and took its devious way towards a mid-day dinner. The old man and his son passed to the platform.

‘Joseph,’ said Rebecca, descending, ‘put that pipe away. For shame—on a Sunday, an’ at meeting too.’

‘All right, missis,’ said Bushell senior. ‘There’s no harm in a pipe.’ And he smoked on placidly.

His wife, knowing by old experience the uselessness of opposition, resigned the point with a sigh, and walked gravely away with the Reverend Paul Screed.

In these days in which I write the Reverend Paul is dead, and no truth can hurt his feelings any more. But it is true of him that he preached a vulgar gospel, worshipped a vulgar god, and had vulgar notions upon all things which came within the sphere of an intellect not too well instructed. He was always in remarkable earnest, and was very certain that all his beliefs were accurate and that all beliefs running counter to his own were sinful. He was incapable of doing a wilful wrong to anybody. In person he was gaunt and bony, and his general aspect was repellent. Young Joe, resenting most things, resented the Reverend Paul with a vehemence inspired by direct hate. The Reverend Paul, for his part, looked on the young man with a stony severity of holiness which foresaw for him eternal pains and penalties.

Mrs. Bushell, arm-in-arm with the minister,

walked homewards, and her husband and her son followed at a little distance. By-and-by came round a corner of the lane, facing this broken quartette, a youngster resplendent in the devices of the latest fashion, switching at the hedges as he walked. The lane was fairly filled with scattered groups of homeward-going worshippers, and all but the new-comer were walking in one direction. He strolled along, a good deal stared at, and pausing suddenly before young Joe, thrust out a gloved hand, and said 'Good morning' in a loud and cheery voice. The youngster, a little embarrassed, returned his greeting. The old man, without pausing, turned his head, and in his broadest drawl bade his son be home in time for dinner.

'Who's that?' said the new-comer. He was one of those people who, without knowing it, are audible under ordinary conditions over a circuit of fifty yards.

'My father,' young Joe answered, speaking in tones as loud as the other's, and with an air of injured pride.

'Who's that?' asked old Joe, returning,

and joining the young men as they stood before each other.

‘Mr. Sydney Cheston,’ said young Joe ;
‘Sir Sydney Cheston’s son. My father, Mr. Cheston.’

‘How be *you*?’ said old Joe, pipe in mouth. He kept his hands in the pockets of his mole-skin jacket, and nodded at the baronet’s son with perfect naturalness.

‘I am very well,’ returned Mr. Cheston.
‘How be you?’

‘I’m as right as a trivet,’ old Joe answered, unsuspecting of satire. For a moment he had thought the loud ‘Who’s that?’ a little impudent, but seeing the young man cheerful and self-possessed, forgot to notice it. Young Joe burned to knock Mr. Sydney Cheston down. ‘I’ve heerd Joe talk about you,’ said the old man comfortably. ‘Come and have a bit o’ dinner along of us. Eh?’

‘Very sorry,’ the young buck returned, ‘I have an engagement.’

‘All right,’ said the old man, nodding. ‘Be in time, Joe. Good mornin’, young mister.’

‘Good morning, governor,’ said Mr. Cheston with loud cheerfulness. Young Joe raged inwardly. ‘Queer old bird, the pater,’ the future baronet made comment, in a moderated voice.

‘It occurs to me,’ young Joe replied, in rapid undertone, ‘that I am scarcely a fit repository for your opinions.’

‘My dear fellow,’ said Mr. Cheston lightly, ‘everything must have a beginning. You begin now, and we began a hundred years ago. That’s all the difference.’

‘Possibly,’ said young Joe with great stiffness. His reply was somewhat vague, even to himself; but he felt that he discharged a duty, whilst he relieved the gathered spleen of the whole morning.

‘Don’t be rusty,’ Mr. Cheston answered. ‘Anybody’s welcome to tell me that *my* governor’s a queer old bird. Gad, he is! A very queer old bird. Most men’s governors *are* queer old birds. We shall be queer old birds ourselves some day.’

Young Joe, a little mollified and a little in

haste to be rid of that sore subject, asked what had brought his friend into the neighbourhood. The out-of-door worshippers were still straggling by, and Cheston, taking Joe's arm, turned with him and struck across a by-path which led through cornfields, where the bright scarlet of thick-growing poppies lent more beauty than value to the crop.

'I'm staying with old Moulding, at the Hollies,' Cheston said; 'and as they all went to church this morning, I ventured on a lonely stroll through the region. I'm glad I did it, for I've seen two things which impressed me vastly.'

'Imprimis?' asked young Joe, trying to catch some little seeming of gaiety, if only for wounded pride's sake.

'Imprimis,' answered Cheston, 'the prettiest face I ever set eyes on. A Black Country beauty. A rose springing from an artificial Alp of slag and cinder.'

'Oh!' said the other in a meditative way.

'Pleasing spectacle number one,' said Cheston gaily, as though addressing an audience,

‘led to pleasing spectacle number two. Number one, dressed in the most becoming and least conventional fashion, was apparently bound for church or chapel, inasmuch as she bore a hymn-book and looked devotional and demure. Having no fear of the proprieties before my eyes, and having a natural delight in the contemplation of beauty, I lit up a cigar and strolled after her. By-and-by we came upon an enormous outdoor meeting, where my little beauty met her mother or some other elderly female dragon, and I lost sight of her. But I know where she lives and I am going to have another look at her.’

Young Joe, without seeing any clear grounds for apprehension, spoke with some anxiety, though with outer lightness.

‘Who is this charming young person?’

‘She dwells,’ said Cheston, simulating a melodramatic tone, ‘though in what capacity I know not, at the sign of the Saracen’s Head, and her divine name is Diana—or Dinah. Yes, it’s Dinah. I heard the guardian dragon scold her for being late.’

A blush, partly of anger and partly of embarrassment, was on young Joe's face. He forced a laugh.

'Yes, she's a pretty girl;' then hurriedly, to escape further discussion of the topic, 'And what was pleasing spectacle number two?'

'Pleasing spectacle number two,' said Cheston, with noisy cheerfulness, 'was a sort of she-Boanerges in black silk who harangued the multitude. I protest,' he went on, laughing heartily, 'that she was worth a journey to the North Pole to look at and to listen to. But I dare say you were there and heard her. You were coming back that way. For myself, I walked off to the Saracen's Head and watched my little divinity in again before I turned to walk to the Hollies.'

What with wounded pride, and jealous fear, and his resentful rage at things in general, young Joe was very near to boiling-point.

'You know everybody hereabouts,' said Cheston, with obtuse goodhumour and unflagging enjoyment in the sound of his own voice—

sweeter music than the spheres could make—
'who was the she-Boanerges?'

Young Joe reached boiling-point and bubbled over.

'She was my mother, sir! And in ten minutes you have insulted my father and my mother and have told me how you dogged my—my sweetheart home, and—and—I tell you what it is, Cheston. You cash that I O U I have of yours at your earliest convenience, and don't trouble yourself to know me any more. Good morning.'

And off went the hapless young fellow in a great heat, with a face like a peony, and with smarting tears in his eyes. Cheston stood a moment, stunned, as though an invisible avalanche had fallen upon him. Then he raced after his late companion and caught him by the shoulder in the act of mounting the first stile.

'My dear fellow,' he said pantingly, 'pray forgive me. I was quite ignorant. I wouldn't have done it for the world. Pray do forgive me. I beg your pardon a hundred thousand times.'

Young Joe swung himself out of the other's grasp and mounted the stile. He melted a little notwithstanding. He wanted somebody's sympathy and companionship, and Cheston was evidently very sorry. But how could he turn and show the hot tears which were even then finding their channels on his face? The penitent vaulted the stile after him and pursued him with breathless apology, and at last took him by the shoulders and swung him fairly round. At that, in a sudden gust of added shame for the tears with which his eyes were filled, he gave his rage full swing, and launched a blow at the apologist, and stood waving his arms above him, demanding wildly to know if the prostrate Cheston wanted any more.

'By Jove I do,' roared the late penitent, and springing to his feet he threw his hat and coat upon the grass and awaited young Joe's onslaught. For a minute the two stood face to face, in posture of defence. Then Cheston dropped his hands. 'It was quite my fault, Bushell,' he said, 'and I won't fight about it.'

I don't wonder at your striking me. Let us say no more about it. Shake hands, old man, shake hands.'

Thereupon young Joe shamefacedly shook hands, stammered some broken excuses—'temper greatly tried,' and so forth—and went his way.

'He's got hatsful of money,' meditated the future baronet, as young Joe walked miserably away. 'But ain't he paying for having it, poor beggar?—ain't he just, that's all?'

CHAPTER II.

MR. AND MRS. BUSHELL and the Reverend Paul Screed sat at meat together. A pair of fowls and a leg of mutton, cooked on the previous day to avoid the desecration of the Sabbath by needless labour, decorated the board, whilst hot vegetables made a sort of concession from religious principle to hospitality.

‘Shall us wait for Joseph?’ the old man asked. Joseph was Joe in non-company hours. The conventional form was a concession to the presence of the Reverend Paul.

‘If Joseph can’t get home in time for dinner,’ said Mrs. Bushell, ‘Joseph must go without.’

‘Nonsense, missis,’ said the old man genially. ‘Nobody go’s wi’out grub i’ this house as long as there is any. But we’ll go on wi’out him if you like.’

Grace had already been pronounced by the Reverend Paul, who crumbled his bread in silence during this brief debate, with a demure eye on the leg of mutton. Mrs. Bushell had the head of the table, and set to work business-like on the cold fowls. At that moment young Joe entered, still resentful, and somewhat heated by a hurried walk home. Mrs. Bushell silently carved for him also and set his plate before him. Rather to be doing something to hide the agitation which yet remained with him, than because the food invited him, he took up his knife and fork. The Reverend Paul laid a detaining hand upon his arm, and arose slowly. The three bowed their heads whilst the minister pronounced a second and supplementary 'blessing.' 'For what Mr. Joseph is about to receive may the Lord make him truly thankful.' Young Joe accepted this as a new affront, and his food choked him. He pushed his plate a little away, after making an ineffectual attempt at the cold fowl.

'Joseph,' said his mother with placid severity, 'it is better to serve God than

Mammon. I can't break the Sabbath by cooking to satisfy your carnal appetites.'

'I don't want you to cook for me, mother,' said the young fellow, sorely baited by his own feelings. 'The fowl is well enough, but I am not hungry. That is all.'

The mother sighed—and the sigh said plainly, 'I hold my own opinion.' The father set his hand on the young man's shoulder.

'You've been a bit downhearted-like all mornin'. What's the matter, lad? Bain't you well?'

'I am not altogether well, father,' young Joe answered.

Mrs. Bushell's severity vanished, and she looked at her son's flushed face with motherly eyes and instant anxiety and pity.

'You're a bit feverish, Joseph,' she said; 'I can see that. Have a glass o' wine an' lie down.'

'I think I will lie down,' said young Joe, glad to escape, though conscious of hypocrisy. 'I will lie down a little while if you'll excuse me. No, never mind the wine, mother.'

‘Perhaps,’ said the Reverend Paul, ‘it is the working of the powerful word we heard this morning.’

Mrs. Bushell shook her head, and sighed again. This second sigh said plainly, ‘I am a humble vessel.’

‘Let us hope so, ma’am,’ said the Reverend Paul, at once recognising and waiving Mrs. Bushell’s depreciation of herself.

‘The lad’s well enough,’ said old Joe, reaching out his fork and appropriating a slice of cold mutton.

‘You’re over-careless, Joseph,’ said Mrs. Bushell, helping the Reverend Paul. ‘You’re over-careless yourself, Joseph. I wish Mr. Screed ’ud say a solemn word to him.’

‘I will, ma’am,’ said the Reverend Paul, with his hand upon the beer-jug.

Nothing of this was spoken in young Joe’s hearing. He, cooling himself meanwhile with a cigar in his own room, thought over the events of the morning with self-tormenting accusation. He despised himself for having made allusion to the I O U, and he hated him-

self for having struck his old school companion and constantly good-humoured friend. And he laid all these things, with whatever other of his own faults and misdoings he could think of, at the parental doors ; though, even as he did so, some self-accusing thoughts assailed him.

The Reverend Paul in the meantime meditated on the solemn word he had promised to say to young Joe, and as he thought about it, he grew more and more severe in his judgments upon young Joe's private character and spiritual prospects. It was quite in a mood of prophetic indignation, therefore, that he encountered the object of his reflections. The old man had gone upstairs for his afternoon nap—his custom always—and Mrs. Bushell was asleep in the back parlour, when young Joe came a little stealthily downstairs, and, taking his hat from its peg, went towards the door. The Reverend Paul, also moving stealthily, emerged from the front parlour and approached the young man on tiptoe.

‘May I ask a word with you?’ he said with ghostly solemnity.

‘You may,’ young Joe answered. He had smoked himself into a better humour, but he hated the reverend gentleman, as I have said already, and his gorge arose at him.

The minister went on tiptoe back into the parlour, and young Joe, like a conspirator, followed stealthily. It was the habit of the household to go about in this wise whilst the elder Bushell took his nap.

‘Mister Joseph,’ said the Reverend Paul, ‘your mother has requested me to speak a solemn word to you.’

‘About what?’ asked young Joe, with his eyes glittering a little wickedly.

‘Your soul,’ said the Reverend Paul.

‘Ah!’ said Joe, with a sigh of desperation; ‘what about it?’

‘It is greatly to be feared,’ said the Reverend Paul, ‘that you are in a state of impenitence.’

‘About what?’ asked young Joe again. ‘I’m very penitent for some things, and not at all penitent for others.’

‘You resist the Spirit,’ said the minister in

a solemn murmur ; ‘you neglect the means of grace ; you scoff at the way of safety ; you live in open profligacy.’

‘What?’ asked the other. The question was put with startling distinctness, and sounded like a pistol-shot snapping across the subdued grumble of a violoncello.

‘I have watched you closely,’ said the minister ; ‘you spent an hour yesterday in a tap-room.’

‘I did nothing of the sort,’ young Joe declared hotly. ‘I passed through a tap-room on my way to play a game at billiards.’

‘A profitless and sinful waste of time,’ said the Reverend Paul.

‘There are some things,’ said young Joe, with a fine-gentleman manner, ‘which you and I cannot agree upon. I challenge your right to watch me, but every beast acts after his own instinct, and I can’t help that. You are my father’s guest, Mr. Screed, and I am bound not to quarrel with you. If you take any interest in my spiritual welfare, you will refrain from provoking me to wrath. That is, I

believe, the proper phrase. Good afternoon, sir.'

The Reverend Paul Screed's wrath was seasoned by a certain self-repression and a certain sense of authority. He told himself, and he believed it, that he did well to be angry. But, in spite of the fact that he was, according to his lights, a good man, he had a strain of meanness in him. Anger, says the old poet, is a brief madness. It is also a self-revelation, searching as lightning.

Young Joe was on his way to the door, hat in hand. The minister, with one hand on the wall and the other grasping the edge of the door, barred his progress.

'I am not to be debarred, Mister Joseph,' he said, very picked and precise in every syllable, as men only educated late in life are apt to be,—'I am not to be debarred, Mr. Joseph, from doing my duty by any pretended contempt you may assume. It is my business to warn you, and I do it without fear. If my warnings are disregarded by you, I shall carry them elsewhere. I have already told you that

I have watched you closely. I witnessed your parting last night from that unhappy girl whom you are endeavouring to entrap.'

'Eh?' said young Joe, an octave higher than his common speech, and very softly.

'I spoke to her,' said the Reverend Paul, 'and admonished her. And I shall make it my business now, for her soul's safety and yours, to tell your parents and hers what I know about this matter.'

'You will, will you?' said the other in the same soft key.

'I can tell already,' said the Reverend Paul, 'that it will be useless to appeal to any honourable instinct in you. And I have seen enough of the girl whom you have endeavoured to make the victim of your arts and wiles, to know that only constant watching could ensure her safety.'

At that instant three people were tremendously surprised. And I cannot tell who was the most profoundly amazed amongst them. I record the fact. Young Joe struck the Reverend Paul and knocked him headlong into the

arms of Bushell senior, at that moment in the act of entering the room. Father and son regarded each other across the semi-prostrate figure of the minister with blank amazement, for young Joe was as wildly astonished at his own deed as even the Reverend Paul himself could be. Yet, having done the deed, he must abide by it.

‘Why, what’s all this?’ demanded the old man sternly.

‘This fellow,’ said young Joe, scornfully indicating the minister, who held a white handkerchief to his mouth, ‘has the insolence to tell me that he has been watching me this long time past. He says he saw me kiss a pretty girl last night, and that he’s going to tell her mother and my mother, and have us looked after and taken care of. And he has the audacity to tell me that nothing but close watching can save my—my sweetheart’s virtue.’

O disingenuous and cowardly young Joe! It was not too late even then, and one honest

word might have saved you, but you would not speak it.

‘An’ becos a minister o’ God’s word, as is a old man likewise, speaks a honest word o’ warnin’ to you, you go an’ knock him down! An’ you do it in your father’s house, of a Sunday!’

‘He insulted a lady,’ said young Joe, ‘for whom I have a great respect and regard. I never meant to strike him. I tried to leave the room, and he stood in the doorway, and wouldn’t let me pass. Suppose a man had attacked my mother’s reputation before you married her, wouldn’t you have knocked him down?’

Old Joe had been a little too handy at knocking people down in his own youth, on slighter provocation, to feel that he had any great right to be severe about this matter. Yet he felt keenly that an outrage had been committed, and that it must in some way be atoned for. He was angry, but he was puzzled, and, as his readiest refuge from bewilderment, he looked angrier than he was.

As for young Joe, he began to feel that he was dangerous and incendiary. He had knocked down two men in one day, and he was now bitterly ashamed of the achievement. One of the men was his closest friend, and the other was elderly and was laid under professional obligations not to fight. But the more ashamed he grew, the more shameful his last misdeed seemed likely to appear in the eyes of others, and the more necessary it became to shroud himself in a sort of cloak of tacit scorn of everybody, and be sulky in as dignified a way as came easily.

The rustle of a silk dress was heard, and Mrs. Bushell stood in the doorway, by her husband's side. At the bare sight of his mother young Joe recognised the hopelessness of any defence, and threw himself upon the sofa.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Mrs. Bushell.

‘Your son,’ said the Reverend Paul Screed, removing the handkerchief, ‘has answered the solemn word of warning you desired me to address to him by blows.’

‘Not blows,’ said the culprit from the sofa, hardening himself, ‘a blow.’

‘I do not know,’ said the minister, ‘whether I received one blow or more. I am still a little shaken by his violence.’

‘Joseph,’ said Mrs. Bushell, advancing, ‘leave this house, and never come back to it again.’

‘Very well,’ said the young man, rising. Even at that moment the mother’s heart yearned over him, but she must acquit herself of duty first and be tender afterwards. She knew her husband would interfere, and she never dreamed that her only child would leave her, even though she ordered him away.

‘Rot an’ nonsense!’ said the old man angrily. ‘If it’s anybody’s business to order my son out o’ my house, it’s mine. Fair play’s a jewel. Joe’s done wrong, but we do’ know’—(meaning ‘don’t know’)—‘the rights o’this business yet. Now, parson, it’s your turn. Say thy say.’

Mr. Screed answered nothing, and Mrs. Bushell, still confident in her husband’s interference, turned again upon her son.

‘Leave the house, Joseph.’

‘Very well,’ said young Joe again, and passing from the room went upstairs, and began to pack his belongings together. Meanwhile the minister told his story, and from his own point of view told it fairly.

‘Mr. Banks,’ said Mrs. Bushell, ‘ain’t a godly person, but I’ve known Dinah ever since her was a baby, an’ her’s as good a gell as ever lived, I believe. I’ve seen as Joe an’ her was fond of each other, an’ I always thought some-thin’ ’ud come of it.’

‘Cuss it all, passon,’ said old Joe in great heat, ‘why shouldn’t the lad kiss his sweetheart, an’ why should yo’ goo and black her character to him?’

‘I did my duty,’ said Mr. Screed with dignity.

‘Forgiveness is a Christian duty,’ said Mrs. Bushell, alarmed by the sounds which came from above, where young Joe was vigorously cording a box. ‘I needn’t tell *you* that, sir. But Joseph shall beg your pardon on his bended knees, or out of this house he goes.’

‘I am willing to accept his apology,’ said

the Reverend Paul with a real effort towards charity, which cost him dear.

Mrs. Bushell mounted the stairs and entered her son's bedroom. He was hastily searching the pockets of an old light overcoat, and when his mother entered he threw the garment upon the bed, where it lay with all its pockets turned inside out. Whatever he searched for was not found, for he turned, and, disregarding his mother's presence, took a hasty look through a number of documents—old letters, scraps of newspapers and what not—in an open drawer, and then, as if putting off the search to a more convenient moment, tumbled the papers loosely together into a portmanteau which he strapped and locked. His mother watched him with a cold demeanour which belied the longing of her heart.

‘Joseph!’ she said harshly, yearning over him.

‘Yes, mother,’ said he, looking up for a minute.

‘Come downstairs an’ beg Mr. Screed’s pardon, or out o’ this house you go.’

‘Beg his pardon for insulting me!’ said young Joe bitterly. ‘No, thank you, mother. As for leaving the house, I’ve been ready and willing to do that this many a day. It’s been none too happy a home for me, with its parsons and prayer-meetings.’

‘Where do you think you’re going?’ asked Mrs. Bushell severely, wounded by this last allusion. ‘A wise son maketh a glad father, but he that is foolish despiseth his mother. He that refuseth instruction despiseth his own soul, but he that heareth reproof getteth understanding. You come down and beg Mr. Screed’s pardon, or out o’ this house you go.’

‘Very well, mother,’ said young Joe; and Mrs. Bushell, her mission having failed, went downstairs again.

‘Joseph,’ she said, addressing her husband, ‘I can do nothin’ with him. Will you speak to him?’

The old man called his son from the foot of the stairs, and Joe came down with a box on his shoulder and a portmanteau in his hand.

He set them down outside the parlour door, and stood there sulkily.

‘I’ve heerd this thing through o’ one side,’ said old Joe, striving to deal honestly with the case. ‘What ha’ you got to say?’

‘I have said all that I have to say,’ young Joe answered. ‘He was insolent, and I lost my temper. I told him once that he was my father’s guest, and that I had no right to quarrel with him. I bade him good afternoon, but he stopped me, and was more insolent than ever.’

‘Now, look here, Joseph,’ said the old man: ‘you ask Mr. Screed’s pardon, and tak’ them things upstairs again, and be a good lad, and let’s hear no more about it.’

‘I wouldn’t forgive Mr. Screed,’ said young Joe, feeling himself to be a very plucky martyr now, ‘if he asked my pardon fifty times, and that I should apologise to him is out of the question.’

‘Then leave the house,’ said Mrs. Bushell, still belying herself and thinking it righteous to do so.

‘I can send for these, I suppose?’ said young Joe, indicating the chest and the port-manteau. ‘Good-bye, father. Good-bye, mother. When next you feel inclined to be insolent, sir, remember the deserved chastisement you once met with at my hands.’

With that final defiance, young Joe was gone. He was very miserable, and very much ashamed; but there was not one of the three who remained behind who did not confess that he had at least a shadow of right on his side. Indeed, the whole of this poor quarrel was conducted by people who were ashamed of their part in it. The Reverend Paul felt that he had gone further with the lad than duty impelled him. The mother repented of her cruel ultimatum, and cried to think she had not used softer means. The father was angry with himself for having allowed young Joe to go. The lad himself, as we have seen already, was heartily ashamed. Of course each member of the quartette would have fought the quarrel through again, rather than admit just then a shade of wrong on his or her own side.

Young Joe could scarcely analyse his sensations at that time. He was very fond of his father and very proud of him, in spite of an education which had done much to weaken all family ties. For his mother he had an affection much less keen. There had never been any sympathy between them, so far as young Joe knew; and although his negative knowledge was necessarily incomplete, it was a barrier more than sufficient against love's progress. I regret that we shall see but little of that hard old Calvinist, for to one who knew her well she was a woman well worth knowing. She had more affection in her than anybody gave her credit for, and she loved her only child with so passionate a tenderness that she prayed every night and morning that she might not make an 'idol' of him. In this wise she succeeded in disguising her love so perfectly that young Joe had grown up in the belief that his very presence was distasteful to her.

So, with a sore heart and with some burdens of conscience, the young fellow dawdled away from the house in which he was

born, resolved never to return to it. The future looked blank enough, for he had no business or profession, and had discovered in himself no special aptitudes which were likely to be profitable to him. He had ten pounds in his pocket, and might be able, perhaps, on his personal possessions of jewelry and what not, to realise fifty. The prospect was altogether dreary, and in spite of his resolve not to return, he was conscious of a very definite longing that his father would run after him and take forcible possession of him by ear or shoulder. He would willingly have gone back—even ignominiously—so that the ignominy had not seemed voluntary. But nobody ran after him; no restraining voice called him; and young Joe went his way to shame and sorrow, as many a thousand worse and better men have gone before him; for the want of one wise courage in himself, or, failing that, one word of friendly resolution from outside him.

There was nothing to invite or encourage him in the blank Sabbath street, where one cur

lay in the sunshine snapping at the flies. Young Joe had upon him an impulse to kick the cur, but restrained himself, and went miserably and moodily along. It was counted highly improper and even immoral to smoke in the streets on Sunday in that quarter of the world; but Joe, feeling that he was leaving the town and could afford to despise its edict, lit a cigar and hardened himself. He chose a way which led him across certain mournful meadows, where the grass was poisoned by the exhalations of a chemical factory near at hand, and rambled on through frowsy verdure until he reached a canal. The artificial hills rose high on each side of the cutting, and on one side ran clean into the water, wooded to the very edge. On the other, the towing-path was green except for one little streak. The water was without motion, or the place might have passed for an unusually favourable scrap of English river scenery. The artificial bluffs were bold and precipitous, and they had the merit of hiding the defaced country which lay beyond them. Up and down the towing-path

young Joe wandered with the air of a man who has appointed a rendezvous. He waited for perhaps an hour, when round the corner of the farthest bluff came a figure in fluttering white muslin and a straw hat. His back was turned, and the new-comer, with innocent mirthful mischief in her face, ran tiptoe along the sward, and clapped both hands across his eyes.

‘Guess who it is,’ said the new-comer blithely.’

Young Joe returned no answer. The expression in the girl’s face changed. She moved her hands, and saw—what she had only felt before—that they were wet with tears. She threw one arm around his neck, and, seeking his left hand with hers, asked with tender solicitude,

‘What is it, Joe, dear? What’s the matter?’

Young Joe, facing about, kissed her, and took both her hands in his. The tears still glistened on the lashes over his gloomy eyes, and the girl regarded him with a look of fear and anxiety.

‘I have bad news for you, Dinah,’ said young Joe at last. ‘I am turned out of house and home, and I shall have to go away somewhere and face the world.’

‘Turned out of house and home?’ questioned Dinah, with brown frightened eyes wide open.

‘Turned out of house and home,’ young Joe repeated sombrely. ‘But don’t be afraid, Dinah. I shall be able to take care of myself and you. I shall cast about for something to do, and I’ll work my fingers to the bone rather than see you want anything.’

‘Turned away from home?’ Dinah again asked. ‘Who turned you away?’

Joe related the incidents of the afternoon, with some little natural bias.

‘And you see, dear, there’s nothing for it but to go away and’—with a bitter little laugh—‘and seek my fortune.’

‘But, Joe,’ said Dinah, ‘you hadn’t ought to have hit him, and him a middle-aged man. Wouldn’t it be better, darling, to go back and say as you was sorry?’

‘Good heaven, Dinah!’ said young Joe, ‘don’t say *hadn’t ought*. How can I go back and say I’m sorry? I’m not sorry; and even if I were, I couldn’t go back and say so, to have them think I was afraid to face the world.’

Dinah stood grave and thoughtful for a minute, and then said,

‘I suppose I mustn’t tell father as we’re a-going?’

‘My darling,’ said young Joe, ‘you mustn’t think of coming with me. Not at first, you know. I must go away and get something to do, and make a home for you. We can’t run away like two babes in the wood, in that fashion. It won’t be long, Dinah. Don’t cry, my darling, don’t cry. We shan’t be long apart. I’ll take care of that.’

‘I don’t see any use,’ said Dinah, sitting disconsolately on the side of the spoil-bank and wiping her eyes with her little muslin apron—
‘I don’t see any use in being married if a wife can’t go along with her husband when he’s turned out of house an’ home, and hasn’t got

anywhere to go to. O Joe, you can't leave me behind—you can't be so cruel. No, Joe, no, you couldn't have the heart to leave me.'

Joe sat down beside her on the grass-grown bank and soothed her, feeling himself very guilty all the while. Dinah refused to be comforted, and yet found his proffered comfort pleasant. But by-and-by a certain coquettish little petulance took the place of grief, and young Joe knew that he had half won his cause, which he admitted was a poor one to win.

'Don't tell me, Joe,' said pretty Dinah, as your folks are going to drive you away for always—I know better. If you take 'em at their word, and stay away a week, they'll be glad to have you back again.'

Young Joe recognised the truth of this observation, but it played such havoc with the heroics of the case that he resented it and pooh-poohed it with a sombre gloom.

'It isn't very kind of you, Dinah,' said Joe, glad to appear as the injured person of the two 'to make light of such a serious matter. And

I would not lower myself in my own esteem by begging myself back again for anything the world could give me. I couldn't do it, darling, even for your sake. No, I'll work for you and struggle for you, but I won't do a mean thing, even for *you*.'

He said 'even for you' so tenderly, and there was such an obvious self-accusation in him when he said it, that the girl threw her arms about his neck and kissed him.

'I know you're noble an' 'igh spirited, my dear,' she said, 'and I shall never say a word to ask you to be nothing else for me. No, not a word, Joe. And I've been a very thankless girl, Joe, to make believe as it was my trouble, when it was yours all the time. Why, dear me! it's no great matter for me to go on livin' at home with my father an' mother, till you can afford to send for me, is it, Joe? No, darlin', I shan't fret no more about myself.'

He read the devotion and the affection in her heart, and had a dim notion that he could not be altogether a bad fellow, since she gave him such unstinted love. It stirred a vague com-

fort in him and strengthened him to approve of himself. He bullied his conscience into quiet, therefore, and began to take quite a high tone with it.

‘It’s perhaps a good thing, after all,’ he said. ‘A man ought not to be dependent upon anybody. He ought to be able to take care of himself. And I shall go into the world and fight for you, Dinah, and that will help me. And when I have made a place for you——’ He smiled in appreciation of the work already done—in fancy.

‘Don’t mind about its being a very fine place at first, dear,’ said Dinah, nestling to him and admiring him with all her heart—his courage, his misfortune, his love.

‘Not too fine a place at first,’ said Joe, ‘but later on a palace of a place.’

He said it lightly, and she laughed at the badinage, but in a moment they were grave again. It was a bitter business, after all. When the time for parting came, Joe strained her to his breast, and she hung about him sobbing.

‘Go,’ she said, struggling to be brave. ‘Go, an’ God bless you, my own dear, dear, ever dearest Joe.’

At this courageous sorrow young Joe melted.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I *will* go. I’ll go home and beg Screed’s pardon, and I’ll—I’ll tell my father that we’re married, Dinah, and if he likes to cut up rough about it he can, but I can at least feel then that I’ve acted like a man, and not like a coward. And if he likes to send me away then, I can work with a clear conscience, and I shall know that I’ve done my duty.’

Now, women have always been puzzles to me, and I understand very little of them, but I have noticed in them one consistent peculiarity. If you once succeed in awaking in a woman that sense of protecting strength and tenderness which the most helpless of women are capable of feeling over even the most helpful of men, she will protect you, at the cost of serious wounds, from the merest scratch of any little thorn. Dinah would have none of this wholesome and honest sacrifice for her sake.

‘No,’ she said, fairly yearning over him and worshipping him for this bare promise of bare justice. ‘Don’t vex him with any talk about me yet, my dear. Why, you know, darling,’ she went on, strangling her own hopes with the bowstring her sultan had sent her a month before, ‘that if you hadn’t known as it ’ud vex him, you’d ha’ told him of it long ago. And now you want to tell him when he’s vexed a’ready.’

‘I don’t care,’ said Joe, feeling heroic. ‘He can’t do anything worse than he has done. I’ll do the right thing.’

But Dinah clung to him.

‘No,’ she said. ‘You shan’t ruin yourself for me, Joe.’ And she clung to her point with such vehemence that Joe yielded, and had all the satisfaction of seeming heroic without incurring any danger—a joy which I have myself experienced.

They kissed and embraced again, and Joe wiped her eyes, and promised brokenly to write often.

‘You’re not a-going far away, my darlin’,

are you ?' said Dinah, trying to be brave again.

'No, dear, no,' said he in answer ; 'not far.'

'And, Joe, darlin',' she said, after a tearful pause, relieved by many sad kisses, 'will you let me keep my marriage lines ?'

She whispered the question at his ear, and he bent over tenderly the while.

'Yes, yes, my dear,' he answered ; 'I meant to bring them to you this afternoon, but I was in such a hurry. They are packed up in my portmanteau, but I will send them to you.'

'You don't mind my askin' for 'em, do you, Joe.'

'I was wrong all through,' he said ; 'we ought to have been married openly. But I shall do you justice, Dinah. You know that, don't you ?'

And so, with protestations, and caresses, and hopes, and with some repentances on his side, they parted. Joe climbed the bank again, and waved adieu from the top. She answered with a motion of the hand, and he was gone.

CHAPTER III.

MRS. BUSHELL did what she could to atone to the minister for the terrible insult which had been put upon him by her son. Old Joe sat awhile and smoked in silence, and, being greatly exercised by the whole business, drank rather more whisky and water than was good for him. Finally a streak of light appeared, and he went, a little flushed, towards it. It led him for a while by the road young Joe had taken an hour or two before, but he stopped short of the mangy meadow and sounded a heavy rat-tat at the door of a smart-looking house, which stood a little back from the lane. A neat servant-maid responded to this summons.

‘Is Brother George in?’ asked the old man.

‘Yes, sir,’ said the damsel, and led the way into a gaudily furnished parlour, where in black broadcloth sat an intensely respectable man in an armchair by the fireplace.

‘Joe-ziph,’ said the intensely respectable man, dividing the name into two balanced syllables, ‘how are you?’

‘George,’ said old Joe, seating himself, ‘I’m in a bit o’ trouble.’

‘You don’t say so, Joe-ziph,’ said the respectable man, with a wooden want of interest.

‘Yis,’ said old Joe, rubbing his grey hair with an enormous palm. ‘I’m in a peck o’ trouble. My Rebecca has been an’ ordered my Joe out o’ my house, an’ he’s took her at a word, an’ he’s gone.’

‘Dear me,’ said Brother George, as woodenly as before.

‘Yes,’ said old Joe again, ‘he’s took her at a word, an’ he’s gone.’

‘What did her order him off for?’ asked Brother George.

Old Joe told the story, with rough-hewn

brevity, and his brother nodded now and then to signify attention. In point of fact, it interested him more than it seemed to do. He was pretty nearly as wooden as he looked, but he had a very remarkable eye for the main chance. He saw money with an eye at once telescopic and microscopic, and he scented it, or seemed to scent it, as a sleuth-hound scents his game. Joe Bushell had made his money by a remarkably profitable patent, was worth a quarter of a million if a penny, and lived on less than a twentieth part of his income. George had borrowed from his brother to start life as a charter-master, had worked hard and lived hard, and screwed down all under him to the uttermost farthing, and, having made his money chiefly by hard-fistedness, was hated by his workpeople, and knew it, and rather rejoiced in it than otherwise, as being in some sense a tribute to his business capacity. He was a mean and grudging creature, with no instinct of active dishonesty. He had a dull, slow, wooden dislike of young Joe, because young Joe would one day inherit old Joe's fortune.

Not that George had ever had a hope of it himself, but he grudged wealth to anybody, and could have nursed a spite against the very walls of a bank's strong-room for holding so much money. And now for the first time in his life dawned upon him some dim fancy, scarcely a hope, that he might handle Brother Joseph's money as his own some day. It was that dim fancy which made old Joe's story interesting to him.

‘Now,’ said the father, when his narrative was finished, ‘what I want thee to do, George, is just this. Thee go an’ find Joe, an’ fetch him hum. Tek no sort o’ denial. He can stop wi’ thee a day or two, an’ then, when it’s blowed over wi’ Rebecca, he can come back to me. Dost see?’

‘Ah,’ said Brother George, ‘I see.’ And he saw more than he confessed to seeing. He intended no wrong to anybody, but was it likely that young Joe would listen to his solicitations? He thought not. And if that misguided young man declined to listen, might not his absence become a source of profit to his uncle? ‘Where

is he?' the uncle asked, after giving these reflections time to form.

'Well, thee seest,' said old Joe, rubbing his head perplexedly, 'we do' rightly know wheer he is. But he's bound to send for his luggage.'

'Ah,' said Brother George again, '*I* see.'

'I think,' old Joe resumed, 'as he's likely to send for it to-night. Our Joe's allays in a bit of a hurry, an' does everythin' hot-foot.'

'Then,' said George, 'I'd better come up to your place, eh?'

'Just what I wanted,' answered old Joe; and the two set out together. 'Not a word to the missis, mind.' George nodded in reply, turning over in that stiff-jointed mind of his the question—Shall I break or keep *that* promise? Which is likelier to pay? He would not have robbed young Joe—he would not have robbed anybody. Theft was 'agen the law.' But although any plain and straightforward method of transferring a neighbour's coin to his pouch was a thing to be reprehended, the construction of any crooked scheme for that purpose was praiseworthy, and the carriage of the same to

triumphant effect was a thing to be proud of. In short, Brother George was a diplomatist, and had some personal advantages in the diplomatic way—singular as that statement may appear. He could lie, for instance, with a stolidity which defied scrutiny. Practice had done much for him, but the first great gift was Nature's. He was 'inscrutable' enough to have realised a Tory journalist's idea of a prime minister. His respectable countenance, clean-shaven but for its respectable tufts of grey whisker, was scarcely more mobile than a mask. Since he never lied apart from strict necessity, he was commonly regarded as a veracious man. He is not the scoundrel of this story—which, indeed, scarcely aspires to the portraiture of a real rascal—and nobody who knew him thought of him as being anything but a very respectable self-made man, who did unusual credit to his original station in life. The remarkable woodenness of his manner, and a certain solemn drawl he had, were mainly responsible for the family belief in his wisdom. He was the final authority on family affairs.

The Reverend Paul had left the house when the brothers reached it. Mrs. Bushell was sitting in the kitchen with a big Bible before her, earnestly and believingly struggling after comfort in the utterances of Habakkuk. There are people who find Christian philosophies in Solomon's Song and suck satisfaction out of Ecclesiastes ; and Mrs. Bushell was of them. But at this sorrowful hour, a philippic against the Chaldeans, 'that bitter and hasty nation,' had little power to soothe.

'Brother George,' she said, as that respectable person entered, 'has Joseph been a-asking your advice ?'

'Rebecker,' Brother George replied with weighty solemnity, 'far be it from me to deny anythin' as is true. That's what Joe-ziph come to see me for, as far as I can see.'

'Why,' read Mrs. Bushell with her finger tracking the denouncing lines in the great Bible, 'why dost thou show me iniquity, and cause me to behold grievance ? for spoiling and violence are before me ; and there are that raise up strife and contention. Therefore the

law is slacked and judgment doth never go forth ; for the wicked doth compass about the righteous ; therefore wrong judgment proceedeth.'

'Well, well, Rebecker,' said Brother George with a propitiatory accent, 'boys will be boys, you know, an' allays was.'

'They wouldn't *be* boys if they wasn't,' said old Joe, with a touch of the local humour.

'Joseph!' said Mrs. Bushell warningly.

'Becky, my gell!' said old Joe, leaning above her chair and laying a heavy hand upon her shoulder.

She felt the appeal thus conveyed, for she was by nature a woman of much tenderness. But she only straightened herself, and laid her finger once more upon the warning text.

'There's my guide, Joseph,' she made answer, when she could trust her voice, for she was sore disturbed, and her 'worldly longings,' as she called them, moved strongly in her heart.

Old Joe moved away from the back of her chair, and Brother George sat down with an air

of wisdom on him, and looked as one who is prepared to proffer counsel. There was silence for a time ; then Mrs. Bushell turned her head away and asked,

‘ What do you advise, Brother George ? ’

‘ Well,’ said Brother George, venting an elaborate and prolonged wink upon old Joe, ‘ I should advise as nothing should be done, not to say precipitate.’

‘ Yes,’ said old Joe, nodding at his brother, ‘ give him a day or two, an’ he’ll come round.’

‘ Joseph,’ said Mrs. Bushell, with unfortunate solemnity, ‘ if you look for any healin’ of this breach apart from his repentance, you will wait in vain. If you mean as I shall come round, you are mistaken. In this case, Joseph, there is duty to be done, an’ I’ve spoke my last word a’ready.’

Joe shook his head at Brother George mournfully, and George shook his head in answer. Matters were growing rather bright for Brother George, and if the brightness were only nebulous as yet, it might reveal things pleasant to look at by-and-by. Notwithstanding-

ing this cheerful inward knowledge, however, George looked upon his brother with a solemn countenance. He would fain have appealed seriously to his sister-in-law's forbearance, and so have drawn from her a more emphatic and forcible denial of her own desires, but he was afraid of that experiment.

‘Becky,’ said old Joe, being perhaps a little more accessible to emotion at that moment than he commonly was, ‘the lad was hard put on. The parson go’s an’ says things to him about his sweetheart, an’ it stands to r’ason as Joe got humped at it. He axed me, Becky, afore you come into the room, what I’d ha’ done if any mon had said things to me about yo’ afore we got married. It wouldn’t ha’ made much differ to me, I think,’ said old Joe, driving one great hand into the palm of the other, ‘who it was as said it. I’d ha’ floored him, if he’d ha’ killed me the next minute.’

Brother George nodded gloomily in assent to this, for it seemed to him an unanswerable argument in young Joe’s favour. But Mrs. Bushell held firm.

'I've spoke my last word, Joseph. He struck a minister o' God's word, in his own father's house, of a Sunday; an' if that ain't worth sayin' "I'm sorry for," I've got no more to say.'

Brother George nodded again in acquiescence, for this view of the case also seemed unanswerable.

'Gi'e the lad time,' urged old Joe.

'Let him tak' his own time, Joseph,' said the mother staunchly. 'When he's tired o' the husks o' the Prodigal, he'll come back again. But I fear he'll sup sorrow by spoonfuls i' the way.'

She left the room, and old Joe, with a troubled face, set tobacco and a glass of whisky before his brother. The pair sat in gloomy silence for a while, when a knock came to the door. Old Joe answered this summons.

'Who's theer?' he asked.

'Well,' said a voice from the dark outside, 'as fur as my apinium go's, it's a young feller o' the name o' Bowker.'

'Come in, William,' said old Joe in a shaky voice. 'What be you come for?'

‘Why, your son’s at the Dudley Arms,’ said Mr. Bowker, entering the kitchen, ‘an’ he’s sent me up here t’ ax for his box. He’s a-goo’in’ in to Brummagem to-night, he says, an’ on to London i’ the mornin’.’

‘Goo an’ say a word to him, George,’ said the father. ‘Don’t let the lad go further ’n Brummagem. Mak’ him send word to you wheer he is, when he gets theer, an’ we’ll tek care on him. But, George, don’t go to let him know as I ain’t angry wi’ him. Mind that. Do it all as if it was comin’ from yourself like. D’ye see?’

‘I see,’ said Brother George. Could anything have been designed to play better into the hands of a respectable man who desired to secure an advantage and was afraid of a crime? He would not in this case have even the shadow of a lie upon his conscience. All that was to be done was to tell the truth, and obey instructions—in breaking them. Mrs. Bushell, without an apology, was implacable, and her husband wished to have it supposed that he also was very angry. George knew very well

that his nephew would tender no apology just then, and began to look complacently on the promise of the future.

Young Joe sat moody and alone in the smoke-room of the Dudley Arms, awaiting the return of his emissary, when Uncle George entered, and with a solemn aspect took a seat before him.

‘This is a bad job, Joe-ziph,’ said he, shaking his head. ‘I’ve heerd all about it from your mother and father. I don’t say as you was in the wrong, not to say altogether, but you know as it was a dreadful thing to do—a dreadful thing. But look thee here, my lad,’ he continued, with a wooden assumption of geniality which went, howsoever unreal it might be, clean to the lad’s sore heart, ‘blood’s thicker than water, an’ when all’s said an’ done you’re my nevew and I’m your uncle. Now, what d’ye mean to do? They’m hard on you at home, fearful hard.’

‘I shall go out and face the world,’ said young Joe. ‘I’m not afraid!’

‘Of course you ain’t, a fine-built young

fellow like you! It ain't likely as you would be. But look here, my lad—you can't face the world on nothing. Can you, now?'

'I have something to begin with,' said Joe in answer. 'I am not altogether without money. And then, I have a little owing to me.'

'Ah, dear me. Well. I can see 'as you're just as hot-foot as your father and mother! But, come now, wheer do you think o' goin' to!'

'I'd go to America,' said young Joe, 'if I only had the chance.'

'Merriky?' echoed Uncle George. 'It's a long way there.'

'The longer the better,' said Joe bitterly.

'No, no, Joseph,' said Uncle George. 'Don't say that. But if you're bent on it, why, I——. No, no, Joseph, don't think on it.'

'Yes,' said Joe, 'I'll do it. I'll do it if I work my passage out. There's room for a man to move in, in America.'

'Don't you talk nonsense,' said Uncle George.

‘By Jove!’ quoth young Joe, rising, and feeling already the glow of a successful explorer, ‘I’ll show you whether or not I’m talking nonsense. I tell you, sir, I’ll do it, and I will.’

‘Pooh!’ said Uncle George; ‘you ain’t going to work your passage out. Not while you’ve got a uncle as can put his hand in his pocket to help you. No, no, Joseph.’

‘You’re very kind, uncle,’ said Joe, ‘but I can’t accept any help from you.’ And he wondered ‘why did I never see what a good fellow Uncle George is until now?’

‘Wait here a bit,’ said the benevolent uncle, and with that arose, and left the room with stagey stealth. When he returned, he bore with him a sheet of letter-paper and an inkstand. He sat down in silence, and wrote in a slow and laboured manner. Then he produced a pocket-book, from which, after an intricate search, he drew a crumpled receipt-stamp. Gazing hard at Joe, he moistened this with his tongue, affixed it to the paper, and

then, squaring his elbows, he set his head down sideways to the table, and laboriously signed the document. Joe watched him, not knowing what all this might mean, until the sheet, carefully dried before the fire, was placed in his own hands. He read it with a swift moistening of the eyes, less at the gift than at the kindness which dictated it.

‘Thank you, uncle,’ said young Joe. ‘God bless you for your goodness. You are the only friend I have.’

‘If they knowed,’ said his only friend truthfully, ‘as I’d helped you i’ this way, they’d never forgive me. But wherever you goo, Joseph, remember as you’ve got a friend in me. Allays write to me, my lad; allays write to me.’

Therewith the benevolent uncle squeezed his nephew’s hand and left him. Young Joe sat with his elbows on the table, and looked with new-born affection and gratitude after him. Why had he never understood Uncle George until now?

‘A dear good fellow!’ he said aloud in his enthusiasm; ‘a most kindly, generous fellow!’

And with tears of gratitude hot in his eyes, he folded up his uncle’s cheque for a hundred pounds.

CHAPTER IV.

YOUNG JOE, his heart still warmed by his uncle's generosity, sat at the side of the bed in his room at the Dudley Arms that Sunday night, and surveyed the situation. Starting in this well-provided way, it did not seem easy to fail in the world. Practically, as everybody knows, there is an end to the productive powers of a hundred pounds, but, for all that, a hundred pounds is a good round sum for a start in the world, and young Joe saw already in fancy his fortune made.

‘And I’ll make poor little Dinah happy; anyhow,’ he thought. She haunted him, and her memory filled him with a keen and poignant remorse. ‘The poor child,’ he said to himself, ‘must have her marriage lines.’ With that he unstrapped his portmanteau,

tumbled out its disorderly papers on the carpet, and set to work to search for the certificate of the marriage between Joseph Bushell, bachelor, and Dinah Banks, spinster. First, he made a hasty and confident grope amongst the papers ; next, with a little shade of perplexity on his face, he took a more careful search ; and finally, having separately examined every scrap, turned out his pockets, unlocked his chest and searched through its contents, and still met with no success, he sat down on the lid of the box in the midst of his tumbled belongings and clawed his hair with vexation.

‘ Confound it all ! ’ said Joe. ‘ The thing’s somewhere here, I’m sure. I must look for it by daylight.’ With this promise by way of consolation for almost certain loss, he undressed and got into bed. He had but a poor night of it, for Dinah’s appealing face was always before him, and he felt alternately base and heroic as he thought of his encounter with the minister. The candle burned down and went out, with the result particularised in the Honourable Mr. Sucklethumbkin’s account of a public execution.

Then the moonlight sent into the room a beam which travelled very, very slowly across the carpet, and rose very slowly up the fireplace, and when Joe had tossed about for long ages, reached the mirror, and crept along the wall, and slid slowly towards the window, as its brightness faded and died. Then the swallows who built beneath the roof-pipes began to chirrup, and the window glimmered grey. Joe pulled up the blind and lighted a cigar, and looked a last look on the familiar High Street : a last conscious look, at least, for always when Memory brought her budget of pictures to him thereafter, she brought that view, with the grey desolate dawnlight broadening on the closed shutters of the shops, and he heard distinctly, many a time, by Memory's magic, the stately step of the peeler—'the blue-robed guardian of the city streets,' as a minor poet called him once upon a time—patrolling the silent highway.

I—the present writer—have found it necessary, for one reason or another, to face the world anew so often, and under such varying

circumstances, that I have almost worn out the sensations attendant on the process. But striving, as a faithful chronicler should strive, to project myself into young Joe's personality, I succeed chiefly in calling to mind my first impressions of that melancholy yet inspiring business. I recall the heartache and the sense of freedom—the regrets for past folly and the promises of amendment so devoutly sworn—the dear regard for parted friends, the hope to meet again, the determination to return triumphant.

All these held sway in the young fellow's heart. But for Uncle George's news of the attitude of father and mother, he could willingly have gone home again to say good-bye, not without hope of no good-bye being said. Shame pulled him both ways, now homewards, now abroad. After all, going back was out of the question. He packed carefully, purposing to go once more through the papers, but when he came to them he said, without being quite sure of the motive which moved him, 'I'll look into them on the way,' and so thrust them anew

into his portmanteau, and waited drearily for some sign of life in the hotel.

At the first sound of opening doors he rang his bell, and demanded of Boots, who came unkempt and sleepy, the time-table for London. The railway had not reached the outlying Black Country towns at this time, but coaches ran through most of them to the great New Street station in Birmingham, a marvel of art, whose vast glass roof was in those days, as I can just remember, an object of unfading wonder to the populace. The coach would start in time to catch the mid-day train, and there were four hours to wait. He went downstairs and sat alone in the dismal coffee-room, and being presently broken in upon by a damsel in curl-papers, asked for breakfast, and in an hour's time attacked with languid appetite a cindery dish of eggs and bacon, and investigated a funereal-looking Britannia metal urn containing a dark-coloured semi-liquid tepid concoction announced by the curl-papered damsel as coffee. After this he called dejectedly for his bill, ordered Boots to send on his

luggage by the coach in time for the up-train, and set out to walk. His spirits rose as he went along the road. Town seems in danger of meeting town to-day, and some now alive may live to see a vaster London join its scattered parts in the middle of England, forming one solid and prodigious city. But there were fair spaces of field and park about the central town when Joe walked towards it, and here and there a rabbit frolicked across his path, and once he stood still to watch a weasel shoot across the road from hedge to hedge, where a grey rabbit had run a second before. 'The mellow ousel fluted in the elm,' colts pushed their inquiring heads over the gates which held them from the road, the sun shone clear, the wind blew warm. Joe meant no wrong to any human creature. Why should trouble weigh upon him? He pegged on, with snatches of song on his mind, and high resolve in his heart. There was gold in California. Jim Brooks, the High Street tailor's son, had found a nugget weighing two hundred ounces. Gold-digging was the readiest way to wealth

the world had seen, and many a man had prospered at it—Why not he? The great Henry Russell's songs were in vogue, and young Joe sang jollily back to the lark and throstle:—

Pull away, cheerily,
Not slow or wearily,
Shifting the cradle, boys, fast to and fro;
Working your hand about,
Shifting the sand about,
Seeking for treasures that lie hid below.

And so on. The verse was not written in the highest possible style of art, but it might be interesting to know how many young fellows went out of England with that doggerel in their ears and on their tongues. Joe was only one out of many who made it a part of the Litany sung at Gold's great shrine.

He cashed Uncle George's cheque at Lloyd's bank, and drew the hundred pounds in sovereigns, influenced, I fancy, by those gold-digging visions. Paper is but a poor medium between riches and poverty, after all. You may be able to translate it into gold, but it has not gold's magic, and can exert but little of

gold's charm. I am nothing of a money-lover, but I do yet care somewhat for the round ring of minted gold, and find a something sibilant in the rustle of bank paper, as though that rustle whispered, 'Soon shall I fly.' With the hard gold in a lump in his inner breast-pocket, tied in a chamois leather bag, Joe wandered down to the station and awaited the arrival of the coach. By some accident, for the days were leisurely, and people gave themselves plenty of time for most things, the sound of Old Tom's horn came tootling into New Street a quarter of an hour beyond its usual time, and the train was already puffing to be gone. Joe had secured his ticket, and now fell upon his luggage, called a porter, impetuously bade him get these things into the London train, saw them hurriedly labelled, took his seat just in time, and was swallowed up by the darkness of the tunnel before he had looked round him to observe his fellow-passengers. Light, breaking in anew, revealed the florid countenance of Mr. Sydney Cheston, who held out his hand with a loud greeting. Joe took it, a

little shamefacedly, but his friend was determined to make light of the affair of the previous day, and was even ostentatiously hearty. At Coventry they were left alone, and, having bribed the guard with half-a-crown (after the manner of young British gentlemen before Brinsley Sheridan's grandson gave us the good gift of smoking-carriages), they began to smoke at a great rate ; and it befell that in the course of the journey Joe opened his heart, and, having first apologised once more, went on :—

‘ I’m in a deuce of a mess, old fellow. To tell the truth, I was in a wretched bad temper all day yesterday, or I should never have behaved as I did to you——’

‘ Don’t say a word about it,’ Cheston said ; ‘ I didn’t mean to hurt you, but it was my fault.’

Then the young men shook hands, and Joe went on again :—

‘ When I got home there was a parson there. He’s not a bad fellow for a parson, and I’m very sorry for what happened, but I was

in an infernal temper, and he insulted me, and was horribly trying and annoying, and all that sort of thing; and, gad, sir, I knocked him down!

Cheston stared hard at Joe and burst out laughing.

‘What a fire-eater you are, Bushell,’ said he. ‘Excommunication, you know. That sort of thing.’

‘He was a Nonconformist parson,’ said Joe guiltily, ‘and really, in cold blood, I’ve a great deal of respect for him.’

The irreverent Cheston screamed with laughter, and by-and-by asked breathlessly:

‘You must have had a row about it?’

‘A row!’ said Joe ruefully. ‘My mother told me either to apologise or leave the house and never go back again. I couldn’t apologise. It was impossible.’

‘Especially under compulsion,’ said Cheston, still laughing. ‘If apologies were as plenty as blackberries, I wouldn’t give an apology under compulsion. Well?’

‘Well,’ Joe returned, ‘the long and the short of it is, I’m on the way to America.’

‘No!’ cried Cheston.

‘Yes,’ said Joe stolidly, ‘I’m on the way to America.’ Then cheering a little, ‘I shall try my luck on the Pacific side, amongst the nuggets.’

‘By George, you know,’ said Cheston, surveying him with an eye of admiration and envy, ‘I should like that. What a lark it *would* be. No,’ he added sorrowfully, ‘the governor wouldn’t listen to it. In the words of Shenstone, or something like ’em—

I should like for to follow you there,
And to toil where the gold-nuggets breed;
But papa would be ready to swear,
And——

Hang it all! I’m full of these momentary flashes of genius. Aha! Got him!—

And I know that I shouldn’t succeed!

Besides, my son, I haven’t got the rhino. But are you really going? When?’

‘I’m really going, and I’m going now,’ said Joe. ‘Now, at once.’

‘I suppose,’ said Cheston, striving purposely to bury Joe’s angry meanness of the day before, ‘I suppose you remember that I owe you something? Thirty odd pounds, I think it is. If you’ll come round with me, I’ll let you have it.’

‘Well,’ said Joe, striving also to wipe out that ugly remembrance, ‘if you don’t mind, Cheston, I’d rather you kept it until I ask you for it. I have enough to begin with, but I might get hard up, and in that case it would come in usefully. You be my banker, and when I find myself in danger of wanting the coin I’ll send for it.’

‘Good,’ said Cheston; and the two began to talk about California, and told each other what they knew of it—which was mostly more marvellous than true.

‘But what,’ asked Cheston, ‘induced you to come to London? Isn’t Liverpool the nearest way?’

‘Why, yes,’ said Joe, ‘I suppose it is. But——’ there he blushed a little, ‘you see it’s altogether a little sudden for a fellow, and—and,

in point of fact, I never made up my mind until I started to walk into town to catch this train. London is the first place a man tends to, you know, and it's a sort of axle whose spokes radiate to everywhere.'

'Well,' said Cheston, with that happy-go-lucky spirit which distinguishes the average young Englishman, and perhaps helps to make him what he is—the wonder of the world for pluck, and dash, and enterprise—'it doesn't matter a great deal where a man goes, so long as he has the right stuff in him, and sticks to what he takes to.'

'I'm not going to be beaten,' said young Joe valiantly. 'Money isn't everything in the world; and if I can't get much of it, I must do with little.'

'Oh yes,' Cheston answered, 'and besides that, your governor will turn up trumps at the finish. You're the only son, I think?'

'The only child,' said Joe, with a tremor on his lip. 'I mustn't stay away too long, after all, for they're both getting old, and a

little bit frail, and it wouldn't be nice to come back and find them gone.'

'You must write to 'em,' Cheston answered cheerfully.

The conversation languished. Young Joe's heart once mere began to fail him. He had fairly started now, and going back was more than ever impossible until he had at least done something. With little further speech they came to London, and went down to the luggage-van together to secure their belongings. Cheston's came out first. Then, after a long delay, came one of Joe's properties—his chest. Then, after another pause, the van was cleared, and there was no sign of his portmanteau.

'Must have been put out at Rugby, sir,' said the porter in answer to the young man's claim. 'We can send back for it. Where shall we send it, sir?'

Joe gave his address at an hotel in Covent Garden, and was driven thither in a hackney coach. Cheston accompanied him, and that night they dined together. In the morning

Joe made inquiries as to the easiest and quickest way to California, and learned little that was likely to be of practical use to him, for he had no idea as to the right way of going about the business, and wandered rather listlessly about the docks, standing promiscuous treat to nautical-looking men who appeared to have nothing special on their hands. The best way, he concluded, would be to get to New York, and make a start for the gold fields thence. The route to New York at least was clear. Meantime, back to the hotel to see if the lost portmanteau had arrived, and, in case it had, to send the certificate of marriage to Dinah. For it was characteristic of young Joe that, at the moment at which the portmanteau was known to have disappeared, he was resolved that it held the certificate, though whilst it remained in his possession he was most mournfully sure it did not.

No portmanteau for him at the hotel. No news of it at the railway station. No news of it next day, and next day still no news. And on the Thursday night the fast-sailing clipper

ship 'Orinoco' dropped down the Thames, and the portmanteau was finally left behind—and with it the last hope of Dinah's peace? Not so, young Joe inwardly declared. Cheston was with him on the deck, and was prepared to go as far as Greenwich, to keep heart and hope in him at the start.

'We'll have a bottle of champagne, Bushell, for doch an dhorras,' says that young gentleman cheerfully.

Joe accedes, and they go below, and with laughter and clinking of glasses and good wishes and high hope they drink to each other.

'And here,' cried Cheston, 'here is the Rose of the Midlands, coupled with the name of the gentleman who will shortly return from Tom Tiddler's ground with his pockets full of nuggets.'

Joe laughed, a little constrainedly, and drank, murmuring into the glass a word of tenderness for Dinah. He would fain have given his confidence to Cheston, but something withheld him, some fear perhaps of breaking down, or some childish dread of seeming senti-

mental, or reluctant about going at this final moment.

‘You’ll let me know how you get along,’ says Cheston; ‘and,’ drawing him aside, ‘you’ll claim the coin whenever you want it, you know.’

‘All right,’ Joe nodded in return. New clinking of glasses, new good wishes. Wine makes the heart glad and the face to shine, and sets the little cords within tingling and ringing to tunes tender and hopeful, mournful and triumphant. On deck again, the inward orchestra playing ‘Good-bye, Sweetheart,’ ‘The Emigrant’s Farewell,’ and ‘Cheer, Boys, Cheer,’ in a strange laughing tearful medley. Steadfast lights ashore and shifting lights afloat, shining reflected on the transparent gloom of the river, many a time to be recalled by fancy, and looking already memorable and unlike anything seen before. Greenwich and ‘good-bye’—the little boat dancing shoreward into darkness, the great black hulk sliding sullenly down the river and towards the open sea.

And now for the first time in his life young

Joe felt alone. A man may be alone a thousand times without feeling it, or may feel it in spite of society. There are certain normal conditions of nature which we do our best to leave unrecognised. Silence is one, darkness another, solitude a third. We make raids into silence with a tremulous defiance, as a boy whistles to keep his heart up when walking in the dusk through a churchyard. We defy darkness in the feeblest ways, and she has her own in spite of us. One of these days she will creep at an extinguished sun and stifle the fading stars. And as for solitude, every human soul is so alone that no other can get into reach of it, but we make pretence of being gregarious and we forget our fears. These three great negatives, silence and darkness and solitude, are the eternal background against which we fantoccini disport ourselves, for Heaven knows whose amusement. We huddle together to forget these gruesome everlasting negatives; but when we are for a moment severed from the crowd, how the knowledge of them swoops down and shrivels us! Solitude, silence, dark-

ness on the sea, and the hapless young Joe in the middle of them.

He had never been at sea before, and he suffered physically. The Reverend Paul Screed was avenged already, and could he have appreciated his enemy's miseries, he would have been more than ready to forgive. Surely, thought Joe, there was nothing in the world—nothing, nothing, nothing—which could make it worth while to endure this helpless horrible nausea, this fruitless revolt of soul and body against a universe suddenly grown hideous and unbearable. ‘Ah, death I’d gladly welcome,’ sings the melodious Italian tenor in florid declamation to Leonora. Young Joe had no heart to sing it, but he groaned it, as with heavy eyes and pea-green countenance he lay in his berth surrendered to misery. Only one man in a hundred tastes the awful possibilities of seasickness, but Joe was the one in the hundred who sailed aboard the ‘Orinoco,’ and the ship’s look-out had sighted Kinsale Head before he was better. Then he began to recover pluck and appetite together, and the remainder part

of the voyage went pleasantly enough. When a man has been as penitent for three or four days as he had been, penitence is apt to be worn a little threadbare. There is no emotion which cannot be out-worn, and Joe had got through his stock of repentances too speedily perhaps. I knew a schoolboy whose one gustatory passion was cheese. Once being possessed of a spare half-crown, he bought an egregious lump of Gruyère, and attacked it in the solitude of his chamber, and ate until he could eat no more. He has arrived now at man's estate, that schoolboy ; and his youthful feast was enjoyed years and years ago, but if you show him Gruyère at this day you almost drive him from the table. He ate enough to last him for his lifetime. In like manner, young Joe was so greedy of remorse that his four days' feast of woe lasted him the voyage and for some time beyond it.

He landed in due time in New York, and before he had set foot upon American ground the crushing sense of solitude had retired in favour of an exhilarating feeling of independ-

ence. He had already been so long absent from Dinah without sending her a message that he felt it unworthy to write now until he had begun to do something to atone for absence and silence. He was a little dismayed to discover that he was as far off from California, practically, as ever, and that he had not money enough to go there, except in the roughest and meanest way. Then, people with whom he talked set the chances before him in a discouraging manner, and, in brief, his money melted with surprising swiftness, and, though employment was plentiful enough for those who knew how to work, he knew how to do nothing, and therefore got nothing to do. He wrote to Cheston and to Uncle George. Cheston kept his promise and sent the money he owed, and that also melted. Uncle George wrote a letter, which he took the precaution to post in Birmingham, lest the local postmaster should know the lad's address. In this epistle he set forth his deep sorrow at the fact that his brother and his sister-in-law were still implacable. Young Joe's resolve to emigrate—

according to Uncle George—had been the last straw which broke the camel's back, and they were now irreconcilable. The writer expressed his deepest regret for young Joe's prospects, but he sent no money.

Then came two or three days' semi-starvation in New York, then an engagement as fire-mender at a brick-kiln some miles outside the city. This business in a rough and squalid way held body and soul together, but there was no chance of making a home for Dinah out of it. And so Dinah was still unwritten to, and the days and weeks and months went by. He had new remorse, but he had his work to do and his bodily discomforts to endure, and by-and-by memory grew less poignant. After some months he fell in with a lumber ganger, and went with him to the Dominion and lived a rough backwood life, hardening his hands and toughening his muscles and growing a great beard. Anybody seeing him would never have recognised the spruce young Midland dandy, and he had almost forgotten himself.

By this time he was ashamed and afraid to

write to Dinah. He was very unhappy about her often. He was very tender and sore in his thoughts about her always. But he never wrote, and he began to hope that she would forget him, and give him up for dead, and carry on her life without him. In one of his rare letters to Uncle George, a couple of years after leaving England, he mentioned Dinah so particularly that the old fox suspected him of an inclination to come back again. So he wrote in answer that Dinah Banks had married, and from that time forth he received no letters from his nephew. This rejoiced him, for with every day that passed he felt his hold upon his brother's fortune surer and more sure.

CHAPTER V.

THE Saracen's Head was a cheerful and comfortable hostel, proffering on its signboard good accommodation for man and beast, and fulfilling its promise liberally within. Sanded floor, huge open fireplace blazing with an enormous fire, after the generous-looking fashion of the mining districts, where coal is cheap and a good fire is counted first of household comforts. Big bare oak beams in the ceiling, with flitches of mellow bacon stuck flat across them, ripening to the rasher stage ; shining onions in nets and reeves, and hams in canvas jackets bearing them company. Prodigious solid tables of dark oak, much battered by years of rough usage and irregularly gauffed at the edges by idle pocket-knives. Heavy wooden settles, polished by the lounging shoulders of many

generations of guests, and staunch to carry generations more. The present assembly—clad in thick flannel jackets, thrown open to show the gaudy lining of cheap felt carpeting, heavy ankle-jack boots, mostly worn unlaced, with a big crumpled tongue hanging out, as though the boots were thirstier than their wearers, nondescript hats of felt, shaped like basins and without a pretence of brim—the present assembly sat smoking and drinking in a quiet contentment almost bovine. It was noticeable that most of the men were blazoned in a singular manner on the face, as if they had been tattooed and the design had been half obliterated. Each man so marked had felt Death's hand upon his cheek once at least. But that was commonplace, every-day, and in the way of business, and as a general thing was not much thought of.

This was the Saracen's common room, and was rather out of the Saracen's own direct line of observation. He swung, with inflamed countenance, portentous turban, unnumbered jewels, and bilious eyes, above a brighter

window round the corner, and behind the brighter window lay a snigger room—a sort of library of liquor, where bottles held the shelves instead of books. It was a mere bandbox of a room, and what with its jolly fire and crimson window blind, and its glitter of glass and gilt lettering, it glowed and sparkled on this wintry night with amazing warmth and brightness. For the wind was howling and the Saracen was pitching gustily to and fro outside, and shrieking rustily at the weather, and the rain beat at the windows frantically at times. All this redoubled the inner warmth and brightness, of course, and sent the inmates of the cosy room closer with comfortable shiverings round the fire. The inmates of the room were three in number. On one side of the fire sat an old woman, and on the other a young one. Between them an old man in a sleeved waistcoat sat back in an armchair and scorched his legs with an aspect of much contentment. He was a fat man with a pale countenance, white hair, and a well-filled rotund waistcoat. Every now and then with his fat hands he caressed the

rotund waistcoat as if encouraging his digestive faculties, as you pat a horse when he has pleased you. The old woman was ruddy and neat and clean, in an old-fashioned mutch cap with spotless crisp lace edges and having a white silk kerchief drawn squarely over her round shoulders. The young woman was pretty but wistful-looking, her face paler than it should have been ; her eyes giving a kindly observer warrant to believe that they were more used to tears than eyes which had a right to be gay by virtue of their brightness and their beauty should be.

‘Daniel,’ said the old lady, ‘what’s the time?’

The old man stole a caressing hand across the rotundity of his figure and pulled out a fat, pale watch. ‘It’s nearhand on ten.’

‘Time them chaps was goin’, then,’ said the old lady.

‘Ah!’ said the old man assentingly, ‘I suppose it is, missis. I suppose it is.’ He drew his legs from the fire, and stroked them persuasively, as who should say ‘Will you carry

me?' The legs apparently declined, for the feet went back to the fender, and their owner's hands once more offered a silent recognition of the efforts made by his digestive organs. A long-drawn sigh seemed to admit that they were overworked, and that he had no wish to hurry them.

'I do declare, our Daniel,' said his wife placidly, 'you're gettin' lazier every day.'

'Very like, missis,' assented Daniel, 'very like. A mon do't get no suppler at my time o' life.'

'I'm ashamed on you, Daniel,' said the wife, half vexed, half laughing. 'Dinah, light your father's candle, an' send him to bed.' The girl rose to obey. The old woman, laying down the knitting which had hitherto occupied her plump white fingers, set her hands upon the elbows of her armchair and made a motion to rise. By that time the struggle between the smile and the frown was over and the smile had won. Her placid and good-humoured gaze followed her daughter's languid motion across the room, when suddenly her hands

relaxed their hold upon the elbows of the chair and she sank back with a look in which terror and suspicion were singularly blended. The girl reached a candlestick from the mantelpiece, crossed the room for a spill of paper, returned, lighted the candle and set it in the old man's hand. Then stooping over him she kissed his cheek, and sat down in her corner. The mother arose and left the room. A moment later her voice was heard.

'Now, Willy-um, your mother'll be a sittin' up for you. George Bethell, you ought to ha' been abed an hour ago. Tummas, you're on the night shift, *I* know, an' it's time as you was gone.'

'Let's have another half-gallint, mother,' pleaded one solemn roysterer gruffly. 'It'll on'y be a half-a-pint all round.'

'Not another drop o' drink'll be drawed i' this house *this* night,' returned the old lady with unusual acidity of tone.

'Missis,' responded the young man first addressed, 'yo' mote [must not] send Tum

whum sober. His ode woman ain't used to it. Her'll have a fit, or summat.'

'Haw, haw, haw!' from the assemblage. The old lady turned upon the wag with solemn anger.

'Willy-um Bowker,' she said, 'you'm worse than any on 'em, an' to be so young too. It's known far an' wide as nobody ever got drink to mek him unsteady at the Saracen's Head, neither Tummas Howl nor no man.'

'Missis,' said the wag with instant propitiation in his tone, 'it een't like yo to turn rusty at a joke. But we gone away dry to-night i'stead o' drunk, an' for my part I likin' to be about half-way.' A murmur of general approval greeted this statement, and every man seemed to be in favour of the golden mean. But the old lady was inexorable.

'Drunk or dry,' she said with much acerbity and decision, 'you'll go as you are.'

'Come on, chaps,' said Mr. Bowker, who as yet was beardless. 'Her's as good as a mother to all on us, an' what her says her sticks to. "Good-night, missis, and no offence," as

Tum said to the windmill last time he fell agen it.'

'Good-night, missis,' said each grave roysterer as he passed her. She answered each by name. 'Good-night, 'Minadab. Good-night, Ebenezer. Good-night, Meshach.' And so on through a list of the quaintest names, until the last had tramped up the sanded passage and had turned out into the rain. She blew out the candles, bolted the door behind the retiring guests, and returned to the smaller room. The old man had gone upstairs, and the girl was preparing to follow. The staircase, with steps of well-scoured white-sanded wood, opened into this snug little room, and the mother, closing the door, stood with her shoulders against it regarding Dinah. The girl looked at her meekly, but with an air a little startled.

'Our Dinah,' said the mother, 'I want to speak to you. You'd better sit down.' The girl obeyed. 'There's somethin' the matter wi' you. What is it?'

'There's nothing the matter with *me*, mother,' answered Dinah wearily

‘My gell,’ said Mrs. Banks advancing, and bending towards her with an anxious, tremulous severity, ‘you can’t deceive me. There’s somethin’ the matter.’

‘No,’ said Dinah, looking puzzled ; ‘I’m a bit dull. That’s all.’

‘Dinah, you can’t deceive an old experienced woman. There’s somethin’ the matter with you, and somethin’ very dreadful. Tell me this minute what it is.’

‘Oh, mother,’ said Dinah, in an agitated whisper, ‘am I going to die?’

‘It’d a’most be better if you was,’ said the mother. Dinah’s face was white, and her eyes were wide open with fear, but at this she flushed suddenly, and shrank and cowered, with her arms drawn across her face. Her very ears and neck were red and white by turns, as she bent down.

‘Is it that?’ she sobbed ; ‘oh, is it that?’

‘Dinah ! Dinah ! you wicked gell,’ said her mother. ‘Tell me who it is !’ Dinah bent lower and lower, and drew herself away as any defenceless thing draws back into itself at

the touch of an intruding finger. Her mother seized one of her hands, and strove to draw it from her face, but Dinah held her head down so resolutely, and drew her arms so tightly towards herself, that the old woman was powerless to effect her purpose. 'Tell me who it is!' she repeated severely, relinquishing her hand. 'Is it young Joe Bushell—as has broke his father's and mother's heart, and made a huzzy o' you as well?'

'Oh, mother,' cried Dinah, dropping suddenly upon her knees, and seizing the old woman by both hands, 'we were married at Waston Church last Whitsuntide.' Dinah's mother dropped down upon her knees and faced the girl.

'You was married? At Whitsuntide? You an' young Joe Bushell?'

'Yes,' cried the girl, and suddenly releasing her mother's hands, she fell forward upon the floor, and hiding her face again, cried passionately. The elder woman fell forward also, and clipping her by the waist, strove to lift her,



'We were married last Whitsuntide.'



but again Dinah would not move. So they knelt there and mingled their tears.

‘Dinah,’ said the mother, whispering, ‘it never crossed my mind till to-night when you got up to get your father’s candle, an’ then it come to me at a run. But, Dinah, I’m sorry for you, an’ you’ll have a bad time wi’ your father an’ the neighbours. Oh, you poor silly gell not to tell me as you was married! An’ now he’s gone, the Lord alone knows wheer.’

‘He’ll come back again,’ sobbed Dinah. ‘If he’s alive, he’ll come back again.’

‘Haven’t *you* heerd on him, neither?’ asked her mother in surprise and fear.

‘No,’ wept Dinah, ‘never since the day he went away. Oh, mother, do you think he’s dead? They say he’s gone to America, an’ he might ha’ been drowned at sea, or anything. Oh, I can’t think as if he’d been alive he’d ha’ left like this. And he promised to send my lines an’ all, an’ I’ve never heard a word.’

‘Dinah,’ said the mother in a horror-stricken whisper, ‘haven’t you got your lines?’

‘No,’ answered Dinah, still weeping. ‘He promised to send ’em the day he went away.’

Then the mother lifted up her voice and wept aloud.

‘Dinah, you’re a ruined gell, and I’m a miserable, disgraced old woman!’

The immortal Doctor Marigold remarks that in his father’s days ‘registration hadn’t come up much.’ So far as the knowledge of poor Dinah and her mother went, registration had not come up at all. To this very day, in that part of England in which they lived, there are women who believe that the possession of their ‘marriage lines’ is the only surety of their own honour. To lose their ‘lines,’ in the belief of those simple souls, would be to invalidate the marriage ceremony, and to make their children illegitimate. Nor is this curious superstition confined to the downright ignorant classes, as you might fancy. Fairly well-to-do people, who can read the newspaper without spelling the hard words at all, and who would with righteous anger resent the imputation of

ignorance, still stick to the belief. Thirty years ago it was probably general.

Mrs. Banks, landlady of the Saracen's Head, was not by nature an imaginative or an inventive woman. Unless you choose to call the immortal allegories of Bunyan by that name, she had never read a romance in her life. Nowadays Mr. Wilkie Collins is to the fore to help anybody to an elaborate plot upon emergency, and there is, indeed, scarcely a condition of life imaginable upon which modern fiction could not throw a light more or less direct and helpful. But feminine human nature existed on much the same lines as now before the popular novelist came into being. Necessity is the mother of invention, and here if anywhere in the world was a necessity of the sternest sort. At any risk, the family reputation must be saved : at any risk short of crime. It would be surely the very whitest of white lies if the mother could acknowledge her daughter's child as her own, and could thereby save her daughter's reputation. In any case,

the material cost of the child's maintenance would fall upon the Saracen, and his shoulders were broad enough to bear without tremor a score of such burdens. Dinah was the only child of her parents, and if she shared in the deceit she could rob nobody. So the old woman mellowed her plan, and slowly turned it over, and then laid it before Dinah.

‘Dinah, my dear, we’re in a peck o’ trouble, and we shall ha’ to get weselves out on it as best we can. It ’ud break thy father’s heart to know it, and it mustn’t be let get to his hearin’ at all.’

‘How can we help it?’ asked Dinah, forlorn and pale.

The old lady revealed her plan in a sentence.

‘He must be made to think as the child’s mine.’ Dinah quivered at this. One of those amazing and mysterious instincts which make mothers what they are, awoke in her, and she felt as if her unborn baby were being stolen from her. The mother saw this and understood it, being a mother. ‘By yourself it’ll be all your

own. I must tell Daniel as I expect it. He'll be sore amazed, I doubt, but you must get away into the country when the time's comin', an' I must come to see you. Then you'll ha' to write to your father an' say as I'm took ill, an' can't come back again. Then, when it's all o'er, we can come back together, an' nobody 'll think anythin' about it.'

From the first moment of Dinah's proclamation of the truth, there had been no shadow of doubt in the mother's mind. She believed the story unreservedly, and when Dinah told it in full, setting forth the errant young Joe's reasons for concealment, she, though her anger burned against the runaway, forgave her daughter the folly of which she had been guilty.

The winter wore away, and through it all Dinah was kept almost a prisoner. Daniel was not often curious about her, but when he was his wife was equal to the occasion, and satisfied him easily. What should make *him* believe that a plot like the beginning of a melodrama was going on at the Saracen's Head? The spring

began to hint that it was coming, and the time drew near.

‘Our Daniel,’ said Mrs. Banks to her husband, ‘our Dinah is looking a bit delicate, don’t you fancy?’

Daniel was a good husband, and agreed with his wife in all things. He had had five-and-twenty years of married life, and found that a policy of general acquiescence kept things smooth.

‘Is her?’ said Daniel. ‘Well, I thought I’d noticed it myself.’

‘I think o’ sendin’ her to Wardenb’ry,’ said Mrs. Banks, ‘for change of air, like. What do *you* say, Daniel?’

‘Very well, missis,’ said that easy man. ‘It’ll do her a bit of good, mayhap, poor wench!’

‘Mayhap it will, Daniel,’ said Mrs. Banks. ‘We’ll go to-morrow.’

Daniel was somewhat taken aback by this precipitancy. Commonly at the Saracen’s Head a thing was mentioned, discussed, put by, mentioned and discussed again, and put into action long after in less sleepy places it would

have been forgotten. He offered no opposition. He was accustomed to philosophise about women in his own way. 'A woman,' he had been known to say, 'is like a pig. Her'll nayther be led nor drove, an' it's as tryin' to a mon to do one as it is to do the t'other.' So, as a rule, Daniel said nothing, but encouraged his digestive apparatus by patting his waistcoat, and let things take their course.

Wardenbury was thirty miles off, and Daniel knew it vaguely as being Coventry way. Mrs. Banks had relatives there, and in the long course of her married life had paid it two or three visits. Daniel used to speak of himself as being 'no great hands of a traveller.' He had been born at the Saracen's Head, and had never been farther away than Birmingham. But though he was no traveller, and might, had he been a demonstrative man, have run a risk of seeming hen-pecked, he had his feelings as a husband.

'Mother,' he advised, 'I shouldn't go to Wardenb'ry yet, if I was you. Think o' your condition.'

‘Think o’ your own condition, y’ode timber-head!’ returned his wife, ‘an’ leave me to think o’ mine.’

‘Well, think on it,’ said Daniel. Mrs. Banks bustled away to tell Dinah that matters were arranged, and to help her to prepare for the journey. The landlord of the Saracen was not in the least degree offended by his wife’s outspokenness. Had she even called upon him to confirm her criticism he would probably have done it.

The morrow came, and Dinah was smuggled into the trap in the back yard. The mother followed. A shock-headed stable-boy called Jabez drove the pair to the railway station, and returned alone. Next morning came a letter to Daniel stating that Mrs. Banks would spend a day or two at Wardenbury.

‘I knowed how it ’ud be,’ said Daniel. ‘Once let ’em goo a-gaddin’ about, an’ thee may’st whistle for ’em afore they comin’ back again.’ He had not the remotest suspicion. He had never read anything more romantic than an invoice for wines and spirits, and he

had never seen a play. Even if he had, why should he suspect his wife and daughter? The day or two lengthened into a week, and then came the news that he was again a father. His old age was blessed with a son. He took an extra glass or two on the strength of it, and went about with an air of proprietorial gravity, crossed at times by an involuntary smile. Towards evening the neighbours dropped in as usual. Daniel imparted the news and was congratulated. He sat in his big armchair with his hands resting on the crook of a thick walking-stick and his elbows squared, and looked as if he thought that he deserved the congratulations and had earned the applause of the world. There was an air upon him as of one who might boast if he would, but would not. The little snuggerly was rather better filled than common that evening, and the health of the son and heir was drunk pretty frequently. Daniel could do nothing less than join. Liquor took little effect upon him : he was accustomed to it, and his inner man was toughened to its assaults. It floated his smile to the surface a

little oftener, that was all. But when closing time came, and he was left alone, he gave vent to his joy and triumph. He struck his stick upon the floor with both hands and arose ; and laughed long and loud.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’ cried Daniel, shaking and beaming ; ‘theer’s life in th’ ode dog yit.’

That night shock-headed Jabez had to guide the landlord upstairs, but on the morrow the old man had accepted the position of affairs, and awaited the arrival of the infant and his mother with an approach to phlegm. He had never received many letters, and had never had occasion to write many. The lack of correspondence did not affect him. Dinah wrote once or twice, but that was all, and mother and daughter came back with the infant, after little more than a month from the date of their departure. Dinah’s restoration to health seemed little less than miraculous. Her languid heavy step was changed for one light and full of energy. Her face beamed and bloomed once more, and there was no trace of grief in her eyes. And surely never was sister so passion-

ately devoted to a late-born brother who came to step in between herself and wealth. For old Daniel—who, in a quiet way, was very well-to-do—made no secret of his intent to leave everything—or nearly everything—to the young stranger. He was ludicrously proud of the baby, and used to rock him in his cradle or watch him as he yelled and fought against milk-warm water and soap, or crowed, in better moods, for kisses in his elder sister's lap. Dinah never allowed him to crow in vain. The old man was amazed sometimes by the almost savage fervour of the kisses with which she mumblingly devoured the little pink body and the podgy little face and hands. Mrs. Banks and her daughter between them attended to the infant's wants with amazing ardour, and sometimes almost quarrelled for the possession of him.

Once Daniel overheard a colloquy between them.

‘Dinah,’ said her mother, in a half-cross, half-appealing tone, ‘you might let me nurse the babby now an’ then.’

‘He’s mine,’ said Dinah defiantly.

‘Why, Dinah,’ cried Mrs. Banks, seeing the old man looking in at the door, ‘a body might think as you was the mother as bore him. Give me the child, I tell thee.’ A meaning look passed between them. Dinah understood, and surrendered little George. But scarcely a day passed in which she was not in danger of betraying herself. She would sit for hours and hours poring over the little red snub-nosed baby face, reading a likeness to the absent Joe in features where your eye or mine could have discovered no atom of resemblance, and where she found one clearer than the truest photograph the sun ever made. It was curious and yet natural how the presence of the child atoned for the absence of the father. And yet there was a terrible cruelty in it. The child would never learn to call her ‘Mother.’

CHAPTER VI.

WHEN Rebecca Bushell took her ultimatum to young Joe, then packing up for departure in his bedroom, she saw, lying upon the bed, an old light overcoat, with its pockets turned inside out. In those pockets Joe had made a hasty search for the certificate, and, not finding it, had cast the coat aside. The mother walked into the son's empty room next morning. It was just as he had left it the night before. All the drawers had been taken bodily from the chest, and were stacked disorderly on each other beside it. The mother, by matronly instinct, began to abolish disorder, crying silently the while. Then wiping her eyes with her apron and looking round to see if all were straight, she noticed the light overcoat thrown across the bed. With native tidi-

ness she took up the coat and straightened it, and observing a rent in one of the pockets, drew out a housewife and sat upon the bed to repair that slight mischief; folding the coat carefully, she placed it in one of the drawers, smoothed the pillows, adjusted the hangings of the bed, and left the room.

This empty chamber became sacred to motherly prayers and tears thereafter, when many heavy months had gone by, and young Joe's silence had not been broken. Many a time she knelt there and followed him into she knew not what of danger and temptation, and many a time she opened the drawer to look at the coat, which was the only relic her only child had left her. By mutual consent of sorrow, husband and wife spoke little of the absent son; but old Joe would yet break out at times, with a shake of his head:—

‘Becky, you was too hard on the lad.’

‘Joseph,’ Rebecca would answer, ‘he that spareth the rod hateth his son, but he that loveth him chastiseth him betimes.’

‘Yes,’ old Joe would say in return, ‘that’s

well enough, but you was too hard on the lad.'

So Rebecca bore alike her own burden and a load which was not hers. She had but one way with all her troubles—to cast them on the hands of that vast, vague, cruel, unfatherly Fatherhood who was the refuge of His chosen, and the scourge and overwhelming terror of all others. She went into her son's room, and there knelt down, and poured out her soul in silent tears; and after a while, seeing how she grieved, old Joe troubled her no more.

The Reverend Paul Screed was less reticent.

'It is ordained,' he would say, 'that the saints shall be troubled, lest they become too much absorbed by the world;' and by a thousand platitudes of the sort he strove to console the inconsolable, probing a wound which could only heal by rest. The Reverend Paul was a good man, and tried hourly to be better than he was, but he had no touch of tact in all his clumsy nature. I looked up to him in my youth, and I respect his memory now, but I

could find it in my heart to wish him and his kind an island to themselves, where they should vex none out of their own communion. Yet, within six months of the day on which young Joe departed from his native town, the minister did as noble a thing as lay within him to do. He sat once more at meat with old Joe and his wife, and dinner being over, the minister cleared his voice with a sorrowful 'Ahem,' and addressed his host and hostess.

'Mr. Bushell and Madam,' he said, with a certain stiff formality which perhaps was the only manner which left speech possible to him, 'it is part of our mortal burden to reflect that we have laid it chiefly upon ourselves. One part of my burden is that I helped to bring a heavy and an undeserved trouble upon people whom I value, and people who have borne my injury without an angry word. Even whilst I thought I was doing my duty as a minister of the Word, I was but revenging myself for certain slights and thoughtless witticisms which your now errant son had vented upon me. I spoke in anger and in bitterness, and I spoke,

as I have since had reason to believe, on no sufficient grounds. And it has been borne in upon me, my friends, that although it is unhappily beyond my power to undo the wrong I did, it is still my duty to confess it humbly before you, and to beg your Christian forgiveness. I have long since forgiven the blow with which your son retaliated upon my sour imperinences. I trust that he has forgiven me my part. I confess my wrong-doing, and I ask, humbly and with deep sorrow, for your pardon.'

Mrs. Bushell had never been so near disliking the Reverend Paul as she was at that minute, for she had long since formed her judgment and forgiven, and this appeal set the old wound aching.

'Parson,' said old Joe, 'say no more about it. There was faults all round.'

'Ah, Joseph,' said Mrs. Bushell with tears in her eyes, 'it's too late now, but I should have been a glad woman at this minute if you'd said me nay when I was that cruel to poor Joe.'

‘I’m master i’ this house,’ said old Joe, ‘and what I ought to ha’ done would ha’ been to ha’ gi’en him a lickin’ theer an’ then, an’ said no more about it.’

When they had time to think about it, husband and wife respected the minister the more for his candid and manly confession, but neither that nor any other reparation could bring back young Joe, who now began to live in the regard of those three with something of the martyr’s halo about him. The neighbourhood knew the story, of course, and the neighbours put their own constructions upon it. Those who went to Ebenezer Chapel, in which edifice the Reverend Paul habitually discoursed, held with their pastor. Those who went to Church, and those who went nowhere—the vast majority—held for the most part with young Joe, and made a hero of him as well as a martyr. Had the young fellow returned within any reasonable time after his escapade, he would have been encountered by precisely that kind of qualified laudation with which it is now the practice of this enlightened and steadfast

country to greet its home-returning warriors or colonial governors.

In those days of decent poverty when she first gave her hand to old Joe, and set up housekeeping with him, Rebecca had mastered the practice of all virtues of industry, and even in later years, when her husband became wealthy beyond the wildest and most extravagant hopes of his class, and when she might have surrounded herself with an army of servants had she chosen it, she still performed all but the roughest work of the household with her own hands. I like to think of the erect, personable woman in her afternoon black silk, looking, as she sat in state in the little parlour, almost too lofty for approach. At such times, when the scrubbing, scouring, and dusting, the washing, baking, mending, cooking—whatever may have been the business of the day—was done with, she would sit there above her big Bible or the ‘Holy War,’ in which volume, as I remember, she took an especial and unique delight, and would resign herself to a stern and stately meditation on holy things.

Whilst young Joe was with her he vexed her often, and her heart ached with fear for his future many a time. But now that he was gone and gave no sign, these daylight vigils became a prolonged and prayerful pain to the mother's heart. Old Joe, who had no taste for parlours, would sit and smoke gloomily and alone beside the kitchen fire. He too had his dreary vigils, troubled, certainly, by no such spiritual agonies as his wife endured, but unlighted by those flashes of pious hope which sometimes illumined her spirit. Now and then Brother George would look in, and, wooden as he was, some qualms of conscience touched him, beholding the desolation he had helped to bring about. I do not wish, as I have intimated, to paint George in the darkest sort of colours. He had not enough of virtuous instinct to be a villain. There was nothing in him for himself to sin against.

‘It’s the best thing in the world as could happen to him.’ Thus George meditated respecting young Joe. It is the mean man’s tribute to honour, the rogue’s admission of the

beauty of justice, that he cares to justify himself in his own mind. 'It'll make a man of him, an' he'll have me to thank for it. It's a precious poor chance I've got o' seein' that hunderd pound again. Eh dear, but I allays *was* a fool wi' my money.' Thus he held his head in the sand, and persuaded himself that his conscience did not see him—an attitude more common than the superficial student might suppose.

It became more and more evident, as time went on, that old Joe and Rebecca his wife were breaking. Trouble told upon the woman earlier than upon the man, for though she bore it better, she suffered more intensely. She fell into languor. The household work, once gone through with such swift bustle, had to be committed to a stranger's charge; she spent more of her time in her bedroom, and old Joe sat, feeling lonelier than ever, by the kitchen fire.

Rebecca, though few people guessed it, had always been strongly attracted to young people. That young people were not attracted to her was natural enough, perhaps, though she felt it to

be hard. But now, in this time of her distress, Dinah Banks became her chief comfort. The clumsy servant wench, though animated by the best intentions, was a poor attendant in a sick room. A hippopotamus in clogs might have gone about as lightly, and she had one or two special faculties in the way of tumbling over fire-irons, dropping dishes and the like, which were aggravated into supernatural exercise by her own desire to go about the sick-chamber silently. Dinah, light-footed and soft-handed, was a welcome relief to the sufferer's nerves. The more Dinah came, the more Mrs. Bushell cared to have her there, and the better Dinah loved to wait upon her.

The thing which drew Dinah there was the hope that she might hear something of her husband. No news came, but at last, on the anniversary of the day of his departure, Mrs. Bushell for the first time spoke of him.

‘It’s a year to-day,’ she said, ‘since my poor lad went away.’

Dinah, whose mind was full of the remem-

brance of the day (for women are your true keepers of anniversaries, and have other saints' days than are sat down in the calendar), trembled and turned pale at these simple words. Rebecca, lying with her eyes closed, and her thin hands folded below her chin, went on :—

‘We’re short-sighted creatures, and there’s only one thing as we can be sure of, Dinah. It’s all in the Lord’s hands.’

Then she lay quiet for a while, and Dinah quivered beside her. For not Joe’s desertion of her, nor the failure of his promise, nor the danger of disgrace, nor the fact that fate had stolen her child from her, had weaned her heart from young Joe. She would believe no ill of him, but dreaded to hear of terrible mischiefs which had happened to him.

‘And now,’ said the old woman again, ‘I shan’t be here long, and perhaps I shall know more about it where I’m goin’ to.’

‘No,’ said Dinah, laying a timid hand upon Rebecca’s brow, ‘you must wait long enough to see him come back again. He can’t have

the heart to stay away for good, if he's alive,' and at that Dinah broke out crying.

Rebecca opened her eyes, and her hands parted.

'Dinah, my poor gell!' was all she said.

And Dinah, pierced by a sudden revelation of instinct, read the stately heart of the rigid old Calvinist aright and knew its tenderness. She leaned over the bed, and laid her face softly in Rebecca's bosom, and the old woman and the young one cried together.

'I always knowed,' said Rebecca, gliding back into the broadest accent of her childhood, 'as you loved him, an' I know as he loved you. An' he wasn't a bad lad at bottom, Dinah, an' he never meant no harm; an' it was my cruel ways as made him angry wi' religion.' The old woman's tears flowed freely, but she went on with no break in her voice. 'Yo' seek help where help is to be got. Yo'll see him come back again some day, Dinah, an' yo' must tell him as whatever he did as was wrong his mother forgive him afore her died, an'

whatever her did as was wrong to him, her asked yo' t'ask him to forget.'

There she ceased again, and lay, stroking Dinah's wet cheek, and feebly drying the girl's eyes. Dinah had an impulse upon her to tell the story of her marriage to young Joe, and the birth of her son, but was restrained by the sense of Rebecca's weakness, and by some mis-giving that without her 'lines' a strict woman like Mrs. Bushell might regard her as an altogether improper sort of person. In a little time she controlled herself, and sat down, once more, beside the bed. For a time both were silent. Rebecca lay with closed eyes like one asleep, and Dinah had risen to steal from the room, when the sick woman turned her head, saying :—

'Dinah, my dear, theer's only one thing as Joe left behind him. Yo'll find it i' the top long drawer i' the next room. It's a grey-coloured coat. Bring it in to me, there's a good gell : I want to see it again before I die. It's the only thing he left behind him.'

'Dinah passed into the next room, found

the coat and returned. Rebecca took it from her, unfolded it feebly, and caressed it with her hands.

‘It was Joseph’s Coat,’ she said. ‘When the wicked sons pretended as young Joseph was dead, they brought his coat to Jacob : Joseph’s Coat. But he was alive all the time in Egypt, and his father lived to see him rich and well-to-do.’

Her mind began to wander, and she fancied that her son stood beside her.

‘Yo’ll be kind to your father, Joseph,’ she said, ‘when you come back from Egypt, and yo’ll remember as it’s my wish as you should marry Dinah.’

Then she slumbered for a while, and Dinah, full of fear and awe, stole downstairs to the kitchen, where old Joe sat in gloomy silence, with an unlighted pipe between his teeth and stared into the ashy bars of the grate.

‘There’s a great change in her, Mr. Bushell,’ she said.

Old Joe shook his head sadly.

‘I’ve knowed as it was a-comin’,’ he said,

in a deep inward murmur; 'I've seen it a-comin' this many a day.'

They passed upstairs together. Rebecca still slumbered. They stood for a time on either side of the bed in silence. By-and-by the dying woman opened her eyes languidly, looked round with no recognition, plucked feebly at the coat which lay beneath her hands, and then, with the last ray of intelligence which visited her soul in this world, recognised the garment.

'It was Joseph's Coat,' she said, and with these words she died.

Old Joe bore his wife's death stonily, and no man could tell whether he grieved or not. The funeral took place on Sunday, and the bereaved husband and his brother George were the only mourners. They walked behind the hearse in long hat-bands and black clothes, saw the dead interred in the squalid graveyard of Ebenezer, and went back together.

'Theer was a will I made,' said Old Joe, sitting beside the kitchen fire, 'i' my son's favour.' He rose and took the document of which he spoke from a sham two volumes in

folio of the 'History of England,' marked on the inside for a chess board. 'Me an' Joe,' he said, 'used to play draughts on that. They used to reckon me a pretty good player, but he could beat my yed off. He was a very good draught-player, was Joe.'

He set down the chess-board lingeringly, and tapped it once or twice with his knuckles. Then, seating himself again, he opened the document.

'It was drawed up,' he said, 'by a lawyer an' all made out proper, this here will was. Everythin' on my Rebecca's death was to goo without reserve to my son Joseph, except a thousand pound to my brother George. And now there don't seem no son Joseph for it to goo to, an' wheer it does goo I don't care.'

At this intimation Brother George's heart experienced a soft and gentle glow. Things were looking well for Brother George. It was a maxim of his that 'fine words butter no parsnips,' but he knew also that they cost nothing, and he expended a few upon his brother's grief.

'Your piternal feelin's, Joe-ziph, as a man might say, is a playin' on your heart-strings. But theer's many a young man as has stopped away for a year as has come back at the end of it, or, leastways, in the course of time. Preaps he mightn't ha' gone to Merriky after all. He might ha' 'listed.'

'He's never wrote to nobody,' said Joe, 'not all the time he's been away.'

'No,' said Brother George, with no token of shame; 'never a word, as I've heerd on.'

The elder brother sat silent, looking at the fire, with his massive hands depending loosely between his knees, and the will held between the finger and thumb of each hand. Without any sign of haste or anger, or any new resolve, he tore the document across leisurely, and with no look of emotion laid the two pieces together and tore them through. Then, in the same listless way, he took the poker, hollowed out the fire a little, pushed the paper fragments into the hollow, and beat down the fire upon them.

Brother George sipped whisky and water

to conceal his smile. Any sort of facial demonstration was rare with him, but this action of old Joe's was in its way a foretaste of triumph for the clumsy schemer, and that soft glow of satisfaction warmed his heart so well that he could not keep its reflection from his face. He might have grinned his broadest, for old Joe never looked at him.

'Twelve months to a day,' said Joe, with his hands still hanging lax before him, and his eyes upon the fire, 'twelve months to a day.'

'What was twelve months to a day?' asked the other.

'From the time he went,' said old Joe listlessly, 'to the time her died.' Then he said 'Twelve months to a day' again, and sat silent for a long time.

A man with an atom of perception in him would have been keenly touched—must have been touched—by the complete forlornness of the old man's face, and voice, and attitude; but George, being by nature wooden, and by cultivation hardened, laid an unsympathetic

hand upon his brother's shoulder, and congratulated him.

‘I am glad to see you bear it so easy, Joe-ziph.’

Old Joe looked at him slowly, dropped his head again, and murmured, ‘Twelve months to a day.’

‘Have a glass o’ grog,’ said George. It was not his own liquor, and he could afford to be generous with it. ‘It’ll warm the cockles of your heart, and do you good.’

He took the kettle from the hearth, mixed a stiff glass, and set it on the hob beside his brother.

‘Jones her maiden name was,’ said old Joe. ‘We was married at the parish church. A good wife for five-and-thirty years was my Rebecca. A good wife.’

‘Yes,’ said Brother George, ‘her was a fine personable figure of a woman, and a savin’ manager. Yes, Joe, her was all that, an’ her’s no doubt better off.’

To this genially spoken commendation the widower made no answer. Brother George fell

to thinking as to what the mourner's fortune might amount to.

In the silence of the room a murmur broke upon his thoughts.

‘Eh?’ said George.

‘It was a twel’moonth to a day,’ said old Joe vacantly. ‘I bairn’t well, George,’ he added. ‘I think I’ll goo upstairs an’ lay down a bit.’

‘Ah, do,’ said Brother George. ‘And I’ll wait here till you’ve had a rest.’

Old Joe, bent strangely, with his massive arms dependent like weights from his broad shoulders, bored his way slowly out of the room, and went heavily upstairs. George sat absorbed in halcyon visions. Two hundred and fifty thousand pounds. Call it two hundred thousand. A wooden man; a dull, slow, unperceptive, unimaginative man. And yet, what visions haunted that dim brain of his and warmed his chilly heart! The summer afternoon wore down to summer evening, and George took a comfortable tea in his brother’s parlour, and returning to the kitchen sat and smoked and sipped his grog, until it grew too

dark for him to see the wreaths of smoke which curled about his head. He called to the ruddy servant, who sat alone in the back kitchen.

‘Sarah, go upstairs and call the master, there’s a good wench.’

The girl clamped upstairs and tapped at the sleeper’s door. There came no answer, and she rapped again. She called downstairs, saying that she could not make him hear.

‘He’s pretty sound asleep, then,’ said Brother George. ‘Leave him to it. I’ll go away home.’

He put on the crape-bound hat, and walked gravely to his own house, and slept the sleep of the just. His dreams were bright with the gleam of two hundred thousand pounds. He sat at breakfast in the morning, and the sunbeams flowing through the window were mellow with the same auriferous shine. There came a hurried knock at the door, and George’s servant, being engaged at the back of the house, left her master to answer it. He found his brother’s clumsy Black Country serving-

wench standing on the doorstep with blanched cheek, and eyes full of terror.

‘I’ve fetched the doctor,’ she gasped breathlessly, ‘an’ he says he must ha’ been dead afore you left the house last night.’

George fell back against the wall of the passage.

‘Dead!’ he gasped; ‘who’s dead?’

‘Your brother Joseph, said the girl.

HERE THE PROLOGUE CLOSES.

CHAPTER VII.

FOUR-AND-TWENTY years have gone by since the prologue opened ; old Joe and his wife have lain side by side in Ebenezer Graveyard for years three-and-twenty. The baby is a young man with moustaches and a sweetheart, and his mother is getting on towards middle age, if an earthly pilgrimage of forty-two years may be supposed to have borne a pretty woman so far. Daniel's thin legs nowadays will scarcely carry him, and he is more than eighty years of age. His wife died half a score of years ago, and took her pious fraud to the grave with her. Errant Joe's uncle George is over sixty, and is mightily prosperous and somewhat swollen out with worldly grandeur. For over a score of years nobody has heard of errant Joe, and to the minds of his contemporaries he is as dead

as Nebuchadnezzar. To Dinah he remains an unchangeable, fixed figure. Whilst other young men have grown into middle age, whilst they wear garments of the fashion of 1874 and have grown wizened or burly according to their nature, young Joe in her remembrance remains in the garb in which she last beheld him : no older, no stouter or thinner ; a blue-eyed young fellow still, with blooming cheeks and a downy bit of whisker. If anywhere alive, young Joe is five-and-forty by this time, and young Joe no longer ; but in Dinah's remembrances of him, Time stands still. In short, madam, you were just married when the tale opened, and yesterday you cried and smiled at the wedding breakfast of your second daughter. And you, sir, were in a round jacket and a broad collar at Eton, with no notion that the wave of a Conservative reaction would drift you into Parliament to denounce the Opposition in well-prepared impromptu epigram, or to demand from your place to be instructed by the right honourable gentleman at the head of Her Majesty's Government. A

great space of time. Let it pass in this story—as it passes in much more tremendous chronicles—like a breath.

Dinah Banks, or Bushell, was a simple-minded woman, and all these years she had passively defrauded herself and her child of a great fortune which was legitimately theirs. George, her son, was not the sort of person to be defrauded of any rights he knew of, but he was as ignorant of these as poor Sir Roger before this time proved himself to be of his dear mother's Christian name. Since Daniel's early days, times had changed a good deal. He had little sympathy with the new crotchet of education; but it is hard for simple folks like Daniel to swim against the tide, and the lad went to the great Grammar School in Birmingham and swallowed his modicum of Latin and Euclid and Algebra, and grew up quite a superior young person, with a natural disdain for home associations and a genuine contempt for his putative father which would have done credit to a princely fairy changeling. Daniel humoured the lad in everything, as old

fathers sometimes will humour sons ; and the boy himself bullied where he could, and had his own way royally when he was sure of it. As he grew up, the fraud his mother had practised bore very bitter fruit. Her child scorned her in spite of her tenderness, and spoke scoffingly of her as an old maid with old-maidish fancies when she would stay him from participation in this or that boyish freak or folly. I have not the heart to tell how she suffered and in what mean ways. Things that to a sister would have been little troubles magnified themselves to the mother's heart, and every day in all these dreary years her soul cried out for the child's love, and yearned unsatisfied. It was a proof, perhaps, of great sweetness of nature that she remained comely still, and that even in some eyes she grew more beautiful as Time touched her. It was commonly said of her that she wore a motherly rather than an old-maidish air, and, indeed, she had grown buxom and a little portly. Her eyes were sad, but wonderfully sweet and affectionate. She had offers of marriage in profu-

sion ; but declined them all, for no reason that the neighbours could divine, and lived solely for her child and her memories of his father. There are among women many thousands of such faithful hearts, who suffer much, but have their reward now and then even in this hard world.

Visible from the upper bed-room windows of the Saracen is a range of hills, of perhaps twelve or thirteen hundred feet elevation, the only notable thing in the landscape. They are not more than four miles away, and they naturally draw the eye of a stranger from the surrounding dead level. Under the shadow of that low range of hills, on the farther side, lies as charming a bit of country as you may look for in a quiet way in England—a rich undulating landscape, with meadow and cornfield, and noble timber here and there, all gathering an added charm from the fact that by a walk of half a mile you may command a view of another valley, lurid with vast columns of fiery smoke and the red tongues of furnace flame that leap at the low skies. Lying in any field

about that pleasant stretch of country on a quiet day in summer, beneath skies whose blue is somewhat toned by the thin gauze of outlying smoke-clouds, you may hear afar off the great heart of giant Labour beating ; and standing still at night, when sound travels farther, you can catch the clank of iron and the shuddering roar or shrill shriek of distant engines, or even the dull thud of the forge hammer. And even in the pleasant valley itself, when you might fancy that you had strayed unaware into the very heart of Agricola's realm, when the ferns are unrolling their crown-like scrolls, and the dog-rose is opening from the bud, and the air is sickly sweet with the heavy scent of the may, you come saunteringly to a little rise and look about you, and you see pit-stacks in the distance sending up their blue curls of smoke, and pit frames with gliding chains above them, filmy-fine.

On the lower slope of one of these hills I know a farmhouse, so old that its outside walls have grown grey and rimy like the rind of a

Stilton cheese. Great beams of timber cross its front, and here and there its lines have swayed picturesquely out of their first prim drawing. Dormer windows peep from the roof: the chimney stacks are Elizabethan, but the rest of the house is a sort of architectural dream made concrete. The building is all gables and corners outside, and within there are little flights of unexpected stairs in unexpected places, and a stranger finds himself intruding on rooms in which he has no business, and wondering how they got there. All the windows are diamonded, and the panes held together by little strips of lead. The floors are sunken in a curious way, and the inner walls warp to this side or that in such a fashion as to give you an impression of being somehow in a house at sea. But the old place is solid and sturdy, pinned together as it is by its huge oak beams, and it may stand for hundreds of years yet in defiance of wind and weather.

Behind this fine old house there is a fine old garden, where in their season ten-week-stocks and gilly-flowers and bachelor's buttons

and other such homely blossoms grow with roses red and white, and lilies pale and golden. Here are hoary apple-trees bearing wonderful fruit, plum-trees, damson-trees, pear-trees, and a little forest of gooseberry bushes. And in great strips between the flower-beds, or edged round with flowers and tangled aromatic bushes, there are spaces set apart for the culture of the homely cabbage and cauliflower, the pungent eschalot and others of its tribe. Everything seems more or less entangled with everything else in this delightful, disorderly old garden. The sides of its walks are edged with box and moss-grown, and its high brick walls, mellow with age, are thick with lichens. Walking here on any summer day you are at liberty to forget that there is any such thing as a forge, a foundry, a coal-mine, a smoke-cloud in the world. Yet even here, if you listen closely, you may hear great Labour's muffled heart beat two or three miles away, and beyond the hills at night-time the sky is livid red. There are gardens as old-fashioned and profuse in growth in many places, I dare

say—gardens where the same homely blossoms blow, and the same scents perfume the air, and the same spirit of retired Quiet dwells; but they lack the charm of this retreat for the most part, because they have not its singular contrast of neighbourhood. When by good chance you meet amongst those ‘fair Circassians,’ of whom so many fables have been told, a woman with any decent pretensions to good looks—when you see a star glinting through the late-divided storm-wrack—when you see the pearl upon the Ethiop’s arm—when you see (if ever you do) Mr. Leigh Hunt’s beautiful symbol of the lily in the mouth of Tartarus—you know what advantages you expect to get out of contrast. Those advantages are here, in this old garden’s neighbourhood, with smoke and fire, and the amazing travail of the earth about it.

The Donne family had lived in the old house for many generations and farmed the land which surrounded it. The fact that in the parish churchyard there was a tombstone bearing their name, and dated as far back as the year 1613, proved that the family was sub-

stantial and respectable more than two centuries ago. At the beginning of the seventeenth century it was not everybody who was honoured with a tombstone. The stones came down from that date almost without a break;—John Aldley Dunne succeeded by John Aldley Dunne for nigh a hundred years, and being followed by other Johns whose J's had long and curly tails. It was at the beginning of the curly-J period that the spelling of the names was changed, Audley being substituted for Aldley, and Donne for Dunne. There were many Dunne Aldleys, too, buried in the churchyard, and the two families had evidently been somehow tied together.

In the year 1870 the male branch of the Donnes became extinct, and there were now left but two women to bear the old name—Mrs. Donne, a notable woman, widow of the late farmer, and her daughter Ethel. Now, in that part of the country people go, as a rule, for Scriptural appellations, and the old English feminine names are neglected. It may perhaps be accepted as corroborative of other evidence

in favour of some old standing in the family that it held a distinctive feminine name again and again repeated. Below the record of Iohn Aldley Dunne's years and virtues ran this legend: 'Alsoe Ethyl hys wyfe, aetat 48, obitt Iune 2, 1621. Alsoe Ethyl, infant child of y^e above.' When the present Ethel was christened, Mr. Borge, her godfather, had objected to the name as bringing ill-luck with it. He founded himself on tombstone evidence, and pointed out the fact that four Ethels had died in maidenhood. His superstitions were derided; but Mr Borge always protested 'he knowed ill 'ud come on it,' and was the more firmly fixed in his belief by the fact that the baby suffered from convulsions while teething. A pretty smart attack of croup and some extra trouble in regard to measles were currently held to have justified the Borgian vaticinations. But the baby grew to girlhood, and the girl became a young woman, without anything more terrible than those infant maladies encountered by the way.

Ethel Donne was nearly nineteen years of

age, and a very charming and beautiful young woman. Her beauty was not of the kind you see in London drawing-rooms or at the opera, but much more robust and blooming and delicate. Her complexion bore looking at, and was admirably waterproof. Ill-natured young women, her compeers, said that her hair was 'carrotty,' from which I desire you to argue that it was of the colour painters have loved to paint—

In gloss and hue the chestnut when the husk
Divides three-fold to show the fruit within,

as Mr. Tennyson says. Her eyes were hazel and full of mirth and honesty. Her skin was of red rose and white; not the dead lily colour which poets have so often and so falsely feigned, but white rose with the faintest live blush in it. Her features were not those of a Greek statue, fortunately, but they were fairly regular. The dear little nose, in particular, was very daintily modelled, and her lips and teeth—to speak of rubies and pearls is to desecrate the beauties of flesh and blood and

ivory. To see her figure at its full advantage you should perhaps have beheld her in the act of hanging out the family washing to dry in that old garden, or with a hayrake in the meadows. To say that she was unaware of her manifold natural advantages would be to portray her as a very foolish young person. Shakespeare thought fit to put into the mouth of a fool the statement that there never was fair maid but made mouths in a glass; but it is probable that he himself believed it. For one prodigy of nature you can show me where a pretty young woman honestly thinks herself plain, I will undertake to find you five hundred natural-minded, lovable young women who, being passably plain, think themselves pretty; and a very proper and kindly ordinance of nature this provision is. Let us think well of ourselves and be happy. The male animal has no right to conceit himself on the score of personal modesty. A very popular writer of essays, who is not beautiful, has made confession in print that he feels a pleasurable sensation in looking at his own reflection in a mirror. I

may not have the courage to follow his bold example with a like confession.

But more than mere good sense, of which she had plenty, her own free nature saved her from the canker of self-consciousness, and she had a certain merry scorn of mere personal vanity. She was country-bred, but not unpolished, though unvarnished. She had a natural art in music, cultivated, not to perfection, but to a fair growth ; and, being natural with her, it enabled her to accompany a singer with grace and fineness, and to sing a simple ballad in a way which even cultured listeners found attractive. Her secular music was mostly antiquated, and was made up chiefly of the songs of Purcell and Shield and Arne, with one or two of Haydn's canzonets. Her knowledge of sacred music went little further than 'The Messiah,' 'The Creation,' and Mozart's 'Twelfth Mass' would carry her. She read French fairly well ; but her knowledge of the literature of that language was confined to Lamartine's 'Heroes and Heroines of the Revolution' and Volney's 'Ruins of Empire.' Notwithstanding

the latter, she was orthodox. M. Volney, after the elegant rhapsodies with which he opens, was, indeed, for the most part Greek to her.

In household virtues she was a treasure, and was mistress of all the arts of the dairy. She made rare butter and the crispest, lightest pastry ; and knew how, if called upon, to wash and bake, and even brew. I remember her mother's damson cheese, and they say that Ethel was her mother's mistress. In short, a charming girl, with rare housewifely qualities, and fit to make a prince a wife, if princes had the good luck to be allowed to choose, as we happy plebeians have.

It is not to be supposed for a moment that all these charms and virtues were allowed to lie unclaimed by the adventurous young manhood of the region. Lovers clustered around her like flies about a honeypot, else were she no fit heroine of mine. The Quarrymoor farm ran into three hundred acres, and every inch was freehold, and she the heiress of it. Why should she not be courted ?

The parish church was so situate that there

was a pleasant walk to it in summer time from three or four parishes in the neighbourhood, and gay young bachelors from several townships, with their sisters and sweethearts, would stroll out on peaceful Sunday evenings, after a four-o'clock tea following on a one-o'clock dinner, and save themselves from any sense of spending the day unfittingly by dropping in at the Old Church, and would then saunter home again in the calm dusk, refreshed by a glance at country green and a taste of country air. Ethel drilled the choir and played the wheezy organ, and had delight in this part of her life. She searched for voices far and near, and strove to impress their owners into her band, and by-and-by got up quite a respectable assemblage of singers. Then it was decided that the organ should be replaced—you heard the bellows wheeze and rattle even when the instrument was in full blast; and it was settled between Ethel and the Vicar that, as a first step towards this consummation, there should be holden in the schoolroom a public *soirée*. This meant the traditional teafight, with the addition of

ham sandwiches to the ordinary provisions, and a concert interspersed with readings afterwards. Ethel entered into the scheme with great fervour. The magnates of the immediate locality were impressed—none of them very tremendous people ; and Mrs. Hick gave a tray of cake, and Mrs. Hince a ham of her own curing, and Mrs. Warmington, of the Mount, six pounds of tea, and Mrs. Jones a batch of household bread, and somebody else a basket of dairy butter. The ladies who gave gifts had the right to preside at the tables, and when the time came they were gay with festive ribbons and sat above their cates with proprietorial smile. But before the time came Ethel had much to do in rehearsing the choir in part-songs culled from her own little *répertoire*—‘Blow, Gentle Gales,’ and ‘Spotted Snakes,’ and the like. The rehearsals were held in the school-room, and very pleasant they were with their mixture of fun and formality ; but the foundress of the festival had her troubles, and chief among them was the want of a tenor who could take the high A natural without cracking

on it. All the young gentlemen of the choir who sang tenor through their noses could get at it more or less by dint of choking ; but she yearned for somebody who would not choke, and in the nick of time he came.

‘Miss Donne,’ said the Vicar one dusky evening, clamping noisily into the schoolroom, and beginning to speak as soon as he had passed the door ; ‘I have brought you a recruit. Allow me to introduce to you Mr. George Banks. Miss Donne, Mr. Banks.’

Ethel rose from her seat at the piano to receive him. The light was so dim that she could make out nothing but a tall and well-set figure—Mr. George was a volunteer—and a pair of pretty broad shoulders.

‘Mr. Banks is a tenor, Miss Donne,’ said the Vicar, ‘and I have induced him to promise his assistance at our *soirée*.’

‘I shall be most happy to be of service, I am sure,’ said Mr. George Banks in a tenor voice of considerable sweetness. To Ethel’s ear the tone had culture and refinement in it, and the speaking voice carried promise. It was

softer and lighter than men's voices commonly are, but it was clear and round. The Vicar began to drag a form about the room and to light the gas, and Ethel saw before her a good-looking young fellow, with brown hair, and eyes, a palish complexion, and a fair sweeping moustache, which gave him perhaps a handsomer look than his features deserved. The moustache was silky and long, and the young man's brown hair was parted in the middle and carefully groomed. He was dressed quietly and in good taste, and bore her scrutiny without embarrassment. Ethel's first view was eminently favourable.

'You have music with you,' she said. 'Perhaps you will give us a solo at the *soirée*?'

'With very great pleasure,' he responded.

'I dare say, now,' thought the girl, 'that he *can* sing. They generally make such a fuss when they can't. It turned out that Mr. Banks could sing nicely; not so well as he thought, perhaps, but he was pleasant to listen to, and that for an amateur tenor is something. The

high A presented no difficulties to him. 'You will be a great accession to us, Mr. Banks,' said Ethel gratefully. 'I am very much obliged to you for coming.'

'Not at all,' protested Mr. Banks. But, walking homeward with Miss Donne and the Vicar, the artful youth drew out the fact that the lady had a soprano voice, and hinted at the preparation of a duet or two. The Vicar seconded him, and Ethel felt a great desire to sing with somebody who really could sing. That was a pleasure she had never enjoyed; and Mr. Banks and the Vicar were, in brief, invited to the farmhouse, and by its hospitable mistress pressed to take supper. They consented; and whilst the meal was getting ready, Ethel and the new-comer tried over 'The Minute Gun at Sea,' and arranged for themselves a tenor and treble rendering of 'All's Well.' The Vicar was delighted, and his delight took a practical turn.

'Really, Miss Donne,' said the Vicar, 'we ought to raise the prices.'

It transpired at table that Mr. Banks had a

four miles' walk before him, and everybody was quite sympathetic with him on that account. He declared that he really didn't mind it, and in fact he set out upon it in evident high good spirits. The young man had finessed for this meeting with some skill, and, hearing of the coming *soirée*, had induced a friend to mention him and his vocal powers to the Vicar, had unobtrusively thrown himself in that good man's way, and procured an easy invitation. He had seen Ethel once by chance a year before, and of set purpose many a time since then, and had longed to speak to her, but had never been able to approach her until now. He could see that he had made a favourable impression to begin with, and he resolved to improve it.

There were more rehearsals before the eventful night came; and Mr. Banks, although much too wary to introduce any other men-singers, who might have turned out unpleasant, brought an ugly old fellow who fluted like an angel, and he threw himself into the musical preparations with so much ardour that Ethel

was charmed with him. He was the most active and obliging young man she had encountered, and the frequency with which he contrived excuses for meeting her did credit to the fertility of his fancy. She found no fault with this, and thought it all natural enough. She took Mr. Banks for a musical enthusiast; and so he was, by a quibble. He was musical after a fashion, and he was enthusiastic—in his admiration of himself and Miss Donne. He could not help thinking what a beautiful couple they would make. The young man's forte was not personal modesty. 'Hang it all,' he had been known to plead, 'I haven't any sympathy with that confounded cant which tells a good-looking fellow that he ought to pretend to be unaware of his own advantages.' He broke out thus pretty often upon John Keen, his chum. 'I'm not an Adonis, I know.' 'No,' John would answer, 'you ain't, old man.' 'But I should pass in a crowd,' Mr. Banks would flow on, silently contemning satire; 'and I should be an ass not to know it.' John was a long-haired young man, careless of his

personal aspect and at feud with society. He made war against convention by smoking in the streets, and by wearing a broad-brimmed felt and his shabbiest coat on Sundays. These habits and an open warfare with the Reverend Jabez Wallier, of Zion, gave John a republican, communistic, free-thinking sort of reputation with the graver seniors of the town. George Banks and he had been at school together, and were companions still, with next to nothing in common. In an incautious moment Mr. Banks mentioned the approaching *soirée* and its date.

‘I’ll go to Quarrymoor with you,’ said John Keen; and George, who could not very well object to this, gave way to it with an ill grace. ‘You don’t mean to say,’ said John, who had or affected the merest suspicion of the local drawl, ‘that you’re going to get into a claw-hammer coat for this business, do you?’ George had been giving elaborate instructions to a Birmingham tailor about a new dress-suit, which must be ready before Thursday.

‘I’m not a barbarian,’ said he, ‘if you are.’

Of course I shall dress for it.' John had a dry and aggravating slow smile, which looked as if it meant something. It came into play now, and now, as always, affected his companion unpleasantly. 'What have you to grin at?' George asked, with some show of temper.

'What has anybody got to grin at on this filthy planet?' asked John; but he smiled, nevertheless, with a look of uncertain humour. George had an uneasy suspicion that his friend was smiling at him.

The evening came, and George appeared resplendent. Anxious as he was to meet Miss Donne, he was careful not to mar the *éclat* of his advent by too early an arrival, and only turned up when the tables had been cleared and put away and the seats arranged. Most of the natives had never seen a man in evening dress before, and they regarded him with critical wonder. After his first song a burly, red-faced man of genial aspect cried aloud, 'Three cheers for the mon i' the shirt-front!' and the ditty was loudly redemanded. George sang again with a readiness which established

him as a popular favourite, and when Ethel and he appeared together the enthusiasm was tremendous. It was a great night for Quarry-moor. A local celebrity had written a poem for the occasion.

Good people all, I hope yo'm well,
An' as yo' an' your tay 'll agree;
For my own part, I'n a täal to tell
About this heeur Swarree.

This composition ran into ninety verses, and the bard was so tickled with his own humour that now and again he laughed till the tears ran, and the audience roared with him and at him. He rhymed swarray with 'ham and buns and tay'; he rhymed swarri with 'summer sky'; and in the last verse he well-nigh killed the Vicar by an evident but unfulfilled intention to make the much-tortured last syllable jingle with 'me and you.' The majority laughed because the act of laughter is catching, and because the example was set them by the gentlefolks. Otherwise, they would have sat to see the word more knocked about even than it had been, conscious of a necessity for poetic

licence in its handling. The bard was the hit of the evening; and an hour later, when he could trust himself, John Keen congratulated him upon his success. 'Well, mister,' said the local lion with a sort of proud humility, 'it eeat everybody as can write poetry.' John went outside and sat upon a tombstone, and gave his heart to mirth.

Meantime, Mr. Banks made large strides in the good graces of Miss Donne. I suppose you would not give much for a story which had no chronicle of love-making. I think it is Agur the son of Jakeh who, in reciting the words of wisdom which his mother taught him, expresses his wonder at 'the way of a man with a maid.' It was wonderful so long ago, and it is still wonderful. The literature of love-making is beyond computation, and the simple theme still pleases.

CHAPTER VIII

It befell that, after the *soirée* at Quarrymoor, Mr. George Banks began to profess an extraordinary interest in matters antiquarian, and to poke about at odd hours in the old church, copying brasses and making sketches of a marble lord of the manor who lay on his back in a neglected corner of the building. John Keen, his chum, had a sort of double-barrelled profession, being both solicitor and mine surveyor ; but his natural tastes were towards architecture, and it was to him that George was indebted for his new pursuit. John, having seen Ethel, followed George's example and fell in love with her. It came quite naturally to *him* to haunt the old church in the hope of seeing her, and George learned the lesson and availed himself of it. So the two young men

used to dodge each other in a rather guilty way on leisure afternoons, and once or twice, with mutual ire and astonishment, met at the church.

I have already told you that George Bushell had inherited his brother Joseph's fortune. He throve mightily, and became a local magnate, signing himself J.P. and being much looked up to. He was a member of the Conservative Central Committee for the county, and had embarked in great mining speculations, and was in these days a staunch Churchman. In affairs ecclesiastical, political, and commercial he came into contact with the best sort of people, and was highly respected. If his money had betrayed him into any pretence of fashion, he would no doubt have been laughed at; but he behaved with much reticence and modesty, and people naturally spoke well of him. No repentances troubled him, and young Joe, his ill-starred nephew, had faded out of memory years ago. Amongst other enterprises of his, he had bought shares in a local bank, and had bought so largely that he might almost

be said to have been the bank's proprietor. He held mines under all sorts of business conditions, and he employed some twenty or thirty clerks at his offices. These, like everybody else in his pay, worked under his own supervision; and amongst them, and high in favour, was George Banks, who, of course, had he only known it, was George Bushell, and legal owner of the desk he sat at, the ledger he made entries in, and the vast estate upon which he was employed. Old Daniel, George's supposed father, had plenty of money, but he would not have the lad trained in idleness. The Saracen was but a little part of the old man's belongings, and George, being acknowledged heir to everything, was lordly with his fellow-clerks and flush of pocket-money. His financial position went with other things to make him a favourite with his employer, and he had freedoms and advantages which his compeers envied.

On the Saturday afternoon which followed the Quarrymoor entertainment, George called upon his employer. Mr. Bushell, intensely

respectable to begin with, had by this time grown imposing in appearance. He wore the high collars and the large stock of twenty years' earlier date, and his hair was silvery. His hands, though large with early labour, had grown soft and plump and white; and his black broadcloth dress, if staid and old-fashioned, was of the best material and cut. He affected some homelinesses of custom, and amongst them he preserved the habit of smoking a long churchwarden clay. This one practice was of considerable value to him, for it lent him a certain patriarchal and unaffected look, and greenhorns said that it showed simplicity of character. The Wrongful Heir sat in dull dignity, and the Rightful Heir smirked before him with propitiatory smile.

'I have called, sir,' said the favoured clerk with suavity, 'to ask a favour. My father's affairs are growing a little too heavy for his hands, and he himself is getting old, sir, as you know. If you could spare me upon an occasional Wednesday afternoon, I could be of more service to him than I am at present.'

‘Mr. Banks,’ said the usurper, ‘no man can serve two masters.’ Mr. Bushell was familiar with many texts out of Scripture, and most of the passages which stuck in his memory appeared to make for his advantage, so that he regarded the sacred volume with respect, as a storehouse of useful aphorism. But the clerk knew his way with him.

‘I am sure, sir,’ he answered, ‘that I am fully sensible of the favour I ask, and of course I know that it is not business-like. But I should be most happy if you would allow me to make up the deficiency I propose to create on other evenings. My father is jealous about entrusting his business to other hands, and his affairs are becoming considerable.’

Mr. Bushell, being well-to-do himself, naturally liked to have well-to-do people about him. He abhorred poverty. It wanted to borrow, which was bad ; or to beg, which was worse ; and it made itself disagreeable in many ways. It presented facilities for being ground down, which could not be looked for in people in prosperous circumstances ; but this mere

amelioration left the main evils of it unchecked.

‘I’ll think about it, Mr. Banks,’ said the usurper; and the Rightful Heir, having bowed and smirked himself away, walked to Quarry-moor attired in festal raiment. Three miles out he overtook John Keen, and on first sighting him was disposed to drop behind; but so slight a matter as the direction of the summer wind made that inconvenient. For John was lighting a pipe, and, in turning his back upon the wind to do it, he faced George. The young men met with a confused attempt at indifferent good-fellowship, and of course each thought the other abominably in the way.

‘Lovely weather, isn’t it?’ said George.

‘Admirable,’ said John. There was a dry, aggravating air of self-possession about this young man, even when he was least self-possessed. He said little at most times, but he always gave George an impression that he was thinking with cutting smartness. In point of fact John inspired a feeling of something very like terror in George’s mind.

‘Where are *you* off to?’ asked George with a great effort.

‘I am going to make some sketches in Quarrymoor Church,’ John answered. ‘There are some stunning brasses there, too, and the pulpit’s very interesting.’ George sketched a little in a mechanical South Kensington manner, and had wasted the evenings of a year or two of his life at the Birmingham Art School; but he scarcely knew whether his companion was chaffing him or not. Ethel practised on the organ on Saturday afternoons, and George was bound to the church to listen to her, and a guilty conscience needs no accuser. This talk about an interesting pulpit sounded like satire under the circumstances; but George controlled himself, and said simply:—

‘I’ll come with you, if you don’t mind.’

‘Very glad, I am sure,’ John responded hypocritically; and they went on in mutual distrust of each other. ‘This dandified duffer,’ thought John to himself, ‘can’t be sneaking after Miss Donne, can he? She’s worth a million of him.’ George, on the other hand,

felt a sort of right over the young lady, and, like a lover, was ready to be jealous. Of course he acknowledged that his rights were as yet exceedingly vague; but they were there somehow, and he wasn't going to have that fellow Keen trampling on them.

Quarrymoor Church had a squat Norman tower of great antiquity, and its lines were too ugly to be made pleasant even by its clustering mosses and ivy. Yet it was pleasing to the eyes of these young men when once their ears had assured them that the shrine held their own divinity. Ethel was in the organ loft, improvising on the wheezy organ, unconscious of listeners. And if she had dreams which were not altogether in character with the place, I, for one, am not disposed to be very hard upon her. She was thinking of a young man with broad shoulders and a tenor voice, and the voice spoke to her even in the broken-winded, asthmatic music of the old organ. It was dusky up there, though the sun blazed hot and bright outside; and in the cool dimness of the place Ethel saw the eyes of the tenor-voiced

young man, and thought them very tender and honest. In truth, their brown inclined a trifle too much to green, and they were something too near together, and had to the observant physiognomist a furtive and even frightened look. The rivals stole into the church on tiptoe, and John began to sketch the recumbent lord of the manor, George making a pretence of watching him; and both of them yearned a little over the wheezy voluntary, which, after all, was played by Love's own hands. They said not a word to each other for an hour, and just as the sketch was finished they heard Ethel closing the organ. Then a ridiculous tremor fell upon them, and the girl, coming in sight of them unexpectedly, shared it to the full; but, showing nothing of it, advanced and shook hands with both, and, leading the way to the porch, covered her own confusion by examining the drawing there to John's satisfaction and George's enrage-ment. But Mr. Banks was too good a diplomatist to display his anger openly, and explained suavely how his visit to the church was entirely due to Mr. Keen's artistic

enthusiasm, how he was taking a walk and fell in with Mr. Keen, how Mr. Keen was going sketching, how he availed himself of that opportunity to take a closer look at the antiquities of which the Vicar had spoken, and how delighted he had been to listen to Miss Donne's playing.

'The poor old organ,' said Miss Donne, 'is in a sad condition.'

'Worst instrument I ever heard,' said clumsy, downright John. Ethel was hurt at this. You may pity an old friend broken by time and asthma, but you do not care to hear anybody speak bitterly of his infirmities. George had more tact, and caught exactly the right tone of half-affectionate regret.

'I dare say,' said he, 'that you won't like the new organ half so well as this.' Ethel looked at him almost with gratitude.

'How well he understands one!' she thought. 'O!' she said aloud, unwilling to be thought sentimental, 'it won't have the associations at first, but of course it will be a much finer instrument.'

‘I beg your pardon,’ said John, ‘for pitching into the old organ. I forgot that it was a friend of yours. That makes every difference.’ Ethel smiled at this, and John continued. ‘I’ve a queer old square box of a piano that I learned to play on. I can’t have it tuned because the wires would pull it off its legs if I did, and all the chords are loose. I like it, somehow, though.’

‘That is precisely how I feel about the organ,’ said Ethel, readily forgiving him.

‘Confound the fellow!’ said George to himself. ‘*He’s* getting sentimental now!’

Miss Donne did not ask the young men to enter the farmhouse, but bade them good-bye at the gate, and they walked home together in rather an ill-humoured way. George betook himself to the Dudley Arms and sought the delights of a shilling pool an hour or two earlier than usual, and, being out of temper, played badly; and, playing badly, lost; and, losing, strove to recoup himself by bets. Losing in that direction also, he went home in a very savage condition, disposed to quarrel with any-

body. Old Daniel, who closed his house at eleven o'clock, had gone to bed an hour ago ; but Dinah was sitting up for her son, and on his entry she saw that he was sullen and out of temper. Indeed, George's tenor voice did not often make home musical.

'I've laid out a nice bit o' supper for you, George,' said Dinah, quaking a little, but affecting not to see the lowering look upon his face.

'*I* don't want any supper,' said George, throwing himself moodily into an armchair, and diving both hands deep into his pockets.

'Won't you eat a bit, my dear?' asked Dinah.

'No,' said George, with undignified mockery ; 'I won't eat a bit, my dear. Who the deuce asked *you* to sit up for me?'

Dinah returned no answer ; and the young man, whose sulks were always a little young-womanish, felt a feminine sense of spite at her quietude. It angered him more than any retort would have done.

'Confound it!' he broke out, his tenor voice sounding in its petulance quite shrill and

querulous, 'can't you leave a man alone? Sitting up to watch what time of night I come in, and spying on me when I go out! You can go to bed now, anyway.'

'Yes, dear,' said Dinah submissively, 'I will. But I wish you'd eat a bit.'

'Well, then,' snapped Miss Donne's lover, 'you'll have your wish for your trouble. Go to bed.'

The last straw breaks the camel's back, but, before that consummation can be arrived at, a good many straws must have been heaped up. Dinah's womanly patience had endured for four-and-twenty years, and through all that dreary time she had kept her secret. She had often so yearned to tell it to her son, that her whole soul had seemed to ache with the effort of repression, and every fibre of her body had thrilled with unsatisfied longing. But she had never been so near to the actual revelation as she was now. Human affection, like everything else in the world, is intermittent, and has its ebbs and flows. The tide of motherly longing and unsatisfied desire of love had been

running high all day in Dinah's heart. She did not cry easily; women who have endured real and lasting sorrows rarely do, for tears have a knack of wearing out their channel when they run too freely. But at George's last rebuff the water sprang to her eyes with a bitter little pang of actual physical pain, and with glistening eyes she laid a timid hand upon his shoulder.

'I wish you'd be a bit kinder with me, George,' she said.

'Then, why the dickens don't you let a man alone?' responded the injured George.

The urgent affection in the mother's heart overflowed all bounds but one. She put her arms about her son's neck, and laid her cheek against his.

'You don't know how I love you, my darling,' she said; 'do give me a little bit o' love back again, won't you?'

'Oh, be hanged!' said George.

Dinah withdrew her hands and stood up as if he had struck her. There was at least this one poor excuse for the son of the errant Joe,

that he had no knowledge of the real relationship between Dinah and himself. Perhaps one other excuse he had may be reckoned a little more cogent. He was a cad through and through, and, being what he was, had no capacity for the understanding of any unselfish love ; and, wanting that capacity, could scarcely guess his own power to wound. Let the student of human nature be honest, and strive to do justice to everybody. How far a cad is answerable for being a cad is a subtle and perplexing question. Only a fool would break a half-gallon jug for not holding a gallon.

‘ Why don’t you get married ? ’ said George ; ‘ you’ve had chances enough. There’s that fellow Hince has asked you three times already, and he’s always hanging about the house now.’

Dinah stood silent. Mr. Hince was a butcher, of prosperous circumstances and more than middle age, and a second time widowed. Some time before the death of his second wife this gentleman had expressed his intention of making Dinah Mrs. Hince the third. So far as so gentle and affectionate a creature was able

to hate anybody, Dinah hated the prosperous butcher.

‘Why don’t you marry him?’ said George, newly aggrieved by the withdrawal of the caress which had offended him and by her silence; ‘you’d better. I don’t want to have you on my hands all my life long.’

‘Good-night, George,’ said Dinah.

George was too surly to answer even so small an overture of peace as this. But the last word was precious to him, and he responded, ‘Just you remember that!’

‘Good night,’ said Dinah meekly once more.

‘Just you remember that!’ her son repeated, and she withdrew to her own room.

This, and many a like scene which had gone before it, seemed to her self-accusing mind the fit and proper punishment of the deceit she had practised so many years ago. She was not clever enough to formulate it to herself; but she thought all punishment the natural outgrowth of crime, and her own girlish yielding to her lover’s impetuous

demands for a secret marriage had long since assumed criminal dimensions in her eyes. Dinah being thus summarily and triumphantly disposed of, it occurred to George that he did want his supper after all, and he sat down to the dish she had provided, and cleared it with a gusto rather increased than otherwise by the memory of the rebuff he had administered. As almost anybody who ever beguiled an evening by the consumption of alcoholic liquors knows, there is a midnight appetite which makes food singularly enjoyable, and George enjoyed his supper. He drank a glass or two of whisky after it, and went to bed, arising late in the morning to breakfast on brandy and soda. Being blessed with a good constitution to begin with, he freshened up on this unsubstantial diet, and, after a stroll, returned to the homely midday Sunday dinner, and played a decent knife and fork there. An hour after dinner, carefully groomed and dressed in excellent taste, he walked to Quarrymoor, and, encountering Ethel in the fields, greeted her in his best manner with a winning smile. The

tenor voice was pleasant in the girl's ears, and she had no guess as to how querulous it might be. In the hours of courtship young people, for the most part, see only the best side of each other. I will not do Ethel the injustice to say that she had but one side to show ; but at this time, as nearly always, the best side declared itself naturally and without effort. She thought very highly of her companion, and though not yet in love with him, she walked with a certain tremulous gaiety towards the boundaries of love's demesne, not altogether unconscious of the direction in which her steps were tending.

George himself, as becomes the male animal under such circumstances, had more pronounced and decided views with regard to his own intentions. When a man is young, he can fall in love with a pretty woman after a fashion, without developing any particular nobilities of sentiment. George was not uncultured. His taste in poetry was not the highest ; but he had read a certain quantity of British verse, and knew, or thought he knew, the sen-

timents which were proper to entertain under the circumstances. The beauties of nature, for instance, came into his scheme of things, and he invited Miss Donne to listen to the strains of a skylark which made double holiday in the Sunday air, freer of smoke-wreaths than common. He stood with her upon the wooden bridge that crossed a small bickering stream, and asked her to guess in what key its murmured music ran. This enquiry quite charmed Ethel, seeming to indicate a love at once for nature and for art. When a young woman is disposed to think well of you, you need not be very clever for her to think you clever, or a pattern of sweet temper for her to think you amiable. There are not many things more pathetic than the trustful willingness of almost any girl to be led into a false estimate of character under such conditions. Titania can fall in love with Bottom the weaver, and give Oberon and Puck no pains to plot against her. She is happy if she wakes from her dream before the golden circle has bound the ass-headed clown and the fairy queen irrevocably together.

Love is an idolater, worshipping the poorest idol with the completest faith, gilding the base earth of which the image is compact until it looks like gold and taking it for gold. And the worst of it is that no wit or worth or wisdom can save any man or woman from this amazing folly. To have a statue of all imaginable excellences set up in your holy of holies, and to be afraid to scratch lest you should find the clay below the gilding! To have the ungilded original entering that sacred place and smashing the statue!

Perhaps, when she went into the fields that afternoon, Ethel was not altogether free of fancy that the young gentleman with the tenor voice and the brown eyes might, by good fortune, meet her. It is certain that when she encountered him the air had suddenly grown sunnier, and the quiet landscape brighter. She had offered George no hospitality on the previous day, not caring probably to make John Keen free of the farmhouse parlour; but when, after a long-drawn stroll, George offered to say 'Good-bye' at the gate, she asked him in, and

he, without even a pretence of polite reluctance, accepted her invitation.

‘Mother,’ said Ethel, ‘you remember Mr. Banks?’

Of course the old lady remembered him well, and he was received with much cordiality. There was something so particular in her mother’s manner, though George did not see it, and was not intended to see it, that the girl blushed two or three times as the three sat together at the tea-table. George found himself, so to speak, in clover. The juicy, home-made bread, the firm, pale-golden butter, the fragrant tea, were each and all pleasant in their way. The young lady’s manner was everything that could be hoped for; the mother was courteous, and evidently pleased to see him; and he was enough in love with Ethel to find even her unassisted presence charming.

Tea being over, they had a little sacred music before church, and after the sacred music they walked to the ugly old Norman edifice together. After church two or three of the neighbours dropped in, and they had a little

more sacred music, Mr. Banks being the central figure of the evening. Then came supper, and, by something like common consent, a seat was found for him next to Ethel's, and in the virgin's innocent heart arose and radiated those little electric flashes which begin with nearness when love begins. This Sunday evening was the precursor of many similarly spent; and George, in a tacit way, became recognised by the neighbourhood as Miss Donne's suitor.

On the Monday following this particular Sunday the Wrongful Heir turned up at his offices.

‘I’ve been thinkin’, Mr. Banks, about what you asked me o’ Saturday,’ said he. ‘You can have your Wednesday afternoons, seein’ as you want to attend to your father’s business, and I shall expect you to give me an extra hour or two on Monday nights, private, at my own house. Will that suit you?’

The Rightful Heir, with ingratiatory smile, became fluent in acknowledgment. The arrangement would suit him admirably. It was understood that the said arrangement

should be and remain in force until further orders. But I regret to say that old Daniel's business received no profit from it, for the holiday was invariably employed in a visit to Quarrymoor. The arrangement for Monday evening brought Rightful Heir and Wrongful Heir more close together than they had ever been before, and George got to know a good deal about his employer's private concerns. He could guess, with a fair approach to accuracy, how much the old man was worth; and he knew, with tolerable exactness, in what directions his money was invested. Old George found him very smart and apt, and felt himself relieved of much labour by the new arrangement. It was not in his nature to trust anybody very far; but he gave young George more of his confidence than he had ever given elsewhere, and the young man repaid him by a sleek and well-conditioned assiduity. Almost any sort of human arrangement is liable to grow out of its original bounds, and Mr. Banks in course of a month or two was not in the least surprised to find himself translated from his stool in the

office to the chair of private secretary in Mr. Bushell's own house. This brought with it an increase of salary and an increase of freedom, and George began to make a considerable figure in the town. It was generally said that old Bushell, who had not a single creature belonging to him, might not improbably leave at least a slice of his vast fortune to young Banks. This kind of rumour is apt, in little country places, to bring about results more or less practical, and George's tenor voice was heard in drawing-rooms whose occupants were quite outside the Saracen's homely sphere.

The summer had gone, and the harvest was over and ended. The fields at Quarrymoor Farm, lately thick with waving wheat and barley, looked threadbare and waste. Here and there a meagre covey rose from the stubble when a chance footstep crossed the lonelier fields. The trees were slowly firing towards the flush of beauty which heralds winter and their own bereavement. Love's little idyll had, of course, been writing itself out all this time line by line, and Ethel had learned many things.

Mr. Banks had not yet formally proposed ; but he had been very near it once or twice, and Ethel was quite content to wait, and to leave unspoiled that delicious maiden uncertainty which yet was certain. Love is a rare epicure.

Whilst George's tenor voice had been growing sweeter and sweeter for Ethel's ears, and she had been translating into him all the charm of her own nature, and, with no egotism, worshipping her own heart's reflection, John Keen had been walking in the same path with George. There was an uneasy sense between the old companions that war was coming, and, although the rivalry between them had never been openly declared as yet, it was none the less recognised. It broke out at last in an unexpected way. John's chronic war with the Reverend Jabez Wallier, of Zion, had reached an acute stage, and the young sinner had written rhymes about the parson. The Reverend Jabez had carried the war back into the enemy's country, and had published a pamphlet in which he had pointedly set forth his belief that John had the sign of the beast in his forehead. The

young man's sense of humour being tickled, he wrote further verses, which to the Reverend Jabez really represented themselves as being the very versified voice of the pit. Even the average churchgoers were shocked ; and John, to his own distaste, found himself on a sudden the hero of that section of the town he liked least of all. The Vicar of Quarrymoor loved a joke and hated a Dissenter, and, one or two copies of John's verses having fallen into his hands, he disseminated them, with less judgment than might have been expected of him. Somehow, the knowledge of this pouring forth of John's muse got to Ethel's ears, and she was alarmed for George. That sweet-minded young man was orthodox and had no sense of humour ; and one can readily imagine the dread an innocent girl might feel, lest a free-thinking firebrand of a fellow, who could publicly chaff a preacher, should communicate his baleful fires to her sweetheart. She warned George against him.

‘He is an old and valued friend of mine,’ said that good creature. He was very glad of

a chance to throw John over and be rid of him ; but if he did it for Ethel's sake, it would be something in his own favour. ' And I have not read the verses. It would be unjust to condemn him without a trial.'

That was obviously fair, and Ethel admitted it. She was a little afraid of John, apart from theological questions ; for he came courting in a dogged manner, praising her to her face without disguise, and blurting out his admiration with a resolved shamefacedness which was hard to hear.

' I don't ask you to leave him unkindly,' said Ethel ; and added, with blushing haste, ' I have no right to ask you anything—but——'

' You have a right to ask me anything,' said George, who was always in these days hovering on the brink of an actual declaration, and always shrinking back again. I will read the verses, and if I find them as bad as they have been represented, I shall not hesitate.'

There the question dropped ; but when the rivals, successful and unsuccessful, next

encountered each other, George opened fire upon his old companion. Whatever a man does, it is worth while to do it thoroughly ; and George, being for the moment orthodox, surprised himself by the religious fervour of his own feelings. The interview took place in the street. John, with his shocking bad hat on the back of his head and his pipe in his mouth, lounged on to meet his rival, who was cap-à-pie in the latest devices of male fashion.

‘I’ve been waiting for an opportunity to speak to you,’ said George, with such a sensation as a man might feel if some important part of him were dissolving inside. True courage, it may be argued, consists in the facing of one’s own fears. A man may behave with magnificent pluck though he *wants* to run away all the time.

‘Ah !’ said John, suspicious of the truth.

‘I hope,’ said George, ‘that you will be able to deny the authorship of those black-guard verses addressed to Mr. Wallier.’ The versifier looked at him and gave him time to

go on. 'They are attributed to you,' George added uncomfortably.

'Have you read 'em?' enquired the versifier.

'I regret to say I have,' responded George. If you examine this response with verbal subtlety, you will discover that it was not a lie. There was something in his rival's manner which gave the versifier an inkling of the truth.

'Never mind what you regret,' said John. 'Have you read 'em?'

'Yes,' said George, lying this time plump and clean, though against his conscience. 'Did you write them?'

'Hit Jabez where he lived, didn't they?' asked John elliptically. 'Yes, yes. I wrote 'em. What about 'em?'

'I regret,' said George, almost startled to notice how much his pious anger helped him, 'to learn that the popular accusation is based on truth. You will see that, after this, it is not very likely that we can know each other.'

‘Clearly,’ said John ; and, dull as he was, the other felt the satire.

‘Good-day,’ said George stiffly.

‘Wait a bit,’ said Keen ; and for a second or two the young men faced each other in silence. ‘Before we part, I’ve a word to say.’ There was another pause. ‘No, I won’t say it now, because I mean it, and after what has happened you’d misunderstand me.’

‘If you have anything to say,’ said George, ‘pray say it now. I shall certainly be unwilling to offer you another opportunity.’

‘Very well,’ said John, with the air of one who is too tired to be scornful. ‘You and I know why we part.’

‘We part,’ said George, ‘because of your indecent violation of things which I have been taught to consider sacred. I’m not a saint’—John nodded with his customary dry smile—‘but there are some things I can’t stand, and——’

‘J. K. at Quarrymoor is one of ’em,’ said J. K. quietly. ‘We both know.’

‘I am at a loss to understand you,’ returned George.

‘Are you?’ the other asked. ‘I’m very glad of it, because it simplifies matters. We have but one quarrel, and only the *odium theologicum* divides us.’

‘Let me know at once what you have to say,’ demanded George with some asperity.

‘I’ll say nothing worse than good-bye,’ John answered; and the old companions parted. The condemned satirist pulled his shocking bad hat from the back of his head low upon his brows, and walked on.

‘She’ll marry that fellow,’ he mused sadly and bitterly. ‘It would have been of no use to warn him at any time, I suppose, and we should only have quarrelled outright if I had warned him now. I wonder if she had heard of me and the Reverend Jabez? Might have frightened her. I don’t care much about public opinion, but I don’t want her to think ill of me. Pooh! What does it matter what she thinks of me? If she can only think well of

him!—that's enough for me to pray for.' The young man went on until he came to the front of the Dudley Arms, and there somebody rounding the corner suddenly ran against him. It turned out to be the Reverend Jabez, who, without apology, hurried on his way. 'I beg your pardon, sir!' cried John with a smile as the parson scuttled along the High Street; but before the verse-writer had turned again the smile had faded, and he walked on with a melancholy countenance and a heavy heart. No man of five-and-twenty can endure with equanimity to be crossed in love. And least of all can any young gentleman endure to be thrown away for a rival whom he knows to be unworthy.

CHAPTER IX.

GEORGE BANKS seems inclined, up to now, to turn out badly, as young gentlemen with the sweetest of tenor voices, the silkiest of moustaches, and the suavest manners, have unhappily done before him. The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table speaks of a Thomas who includes three Thomases—the Thomas you know, the Thomas Thomas knows, and the Thomas God made. All men have their various sides, but the width of difference which can lie between a good woman's apprehension of her lover and the man's real nature is rarely equalled elsewhere. To Ethel, George was a hero; and when, after no more than a six months' courtship, he asked her to marry him, she consented, and thought herself the happiest and most honoured of women. There is pro-

bably a strong family likeness between one proposal of marriage and another, and it seems likely that there is no equally important movement made in life in which men's idiosyncrasies assert themselves less freely.

There had been great efforts made to fit up the new organ at Quarrymoor Church in time for the Christmas festival, and, the important work being finished, Ethel, one evening a fortnight before the sacred day, sent round a shock-headed farm boy to the bellows, drew out the stops, laid her hands upon the keys, and for the first time heard the new voice speak to her. It was quite an event in her life, and a score of the people amongst whom her simple days had been spent were there to share the pleasure of it. There had been finer organs built than this; but eloquence dwells in the heart of the hearer rather than in the voice of the speaker, and Miss Donne had a sort of right of ownership in the new instrument, and, though a more than commonly good musician, would have been charmed with one much poorer. As the music woke from the great square chest in which

until now it had slumbered, it was like the awakening of a soul to life. And as the new soul, with widespread, slow-sounding majestic pinions, fanned its way towards heaven, the player's seemed to follow it, and to hover, clothed in sweetness, high above this mere earth, and its little cares and griefs and un-heroic joys. But she had been no lover if George's soul had not seemed to hover side by side with hers, borne up by the storm-wind of the music. George was not in the organ-loft, though he had begged hard to be allowed to accompany her there. Nobody likes to be seen at a disadvantage. St. Cecilia seated before the organ-pipes with an angel looking at her makes a pretty picture, but the lady probably played in her own primitive days without the use of pedals. There is a good deal of ungraceful labour in playing an organ, and Ethel knew it, and gave George the benefit of her knowledge, compelling him to sit with the rest in the body of the church. Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast, to soften rocks and rend the knotted oak. George Banks was an

emotional person, with some knowledge of music and a considerable liking for it, and, over and beyond this, he was in love. He could lie upon occasion, and he could be ungenerous and ungracious with anybody who was too weak to punish him ; but these faculties are not incompatible with the existence of the power to compass emotional pleasures. His soul also, or what passed for it, took an owl's flight after the dove-flight of Ethel's and the eagle-soaring of the music, and his love mixed with the organ tones and they with it, until his greenish-brown eyes were glistening with easy tears. He had time to be proud of this manifestation of a cultured and impressible nature before the music ceased, and was sorry that Ethel was not there to see the artistic moisture in his eyes. When she came down he told her of it, and praised the beauty of her playing. They walked home together, and nobody was stupid enough to try to come between them, or to distract the attention of either of the lovers from the other.

Anything was welcome at Quarrymoor Farm which gave an occasion for hospitality ;

and, as a matter of course, this trial of the new organ presented a capital opportunity. The maids had set out a supper-table in the old-fashioned parlour—a noble piece of beef, a juicy ham, home-bred and home-cured, a saddle of mutton: all cold, but flanked by steaming dishes of hot potatoes, and supported by vast loaves of home-baked bread on trenchers, and foaming jugs of home-brewed ale. A meal for hungry people, on a night when the keen air made even lovers sharp-set in appetite. Uncle Borge was there, a wizened man in black; and Aunt Borge, a fat lady in blue, who sat down to supper in her bonnet, as a hint that her society might be looked for no longer than the meal should last. The Vicar was there, radiant; and Mr. Hick, the miller, an ardent politician; and Mrs. Hick, the miller's wife. In all, a dozen people sat down to that generous board; Ethel and George being side by side as usual.

‘Now, Mr. Hick,’ said Uncle Borge, ‘what do you think about this here Conservative re-haction?’

‘Why,’ returned the miller, ‘I think as it’s of a piece wi’ welly (well nigh) everythin’.

‘Ah!’ said Mr. Borge. ‘Do you, now?’

‘Why, I remember,’ said Mr. Hick, ‘when the bread riots was on i’ Bilston, when the flour was that bad as the bread ’ud run out o’ th’ ovens. The Toery party was i’ power i’ them days.’

‘Was ’em?’ asked Uncle Borge; ‘an’ wheer was De Isreeayly then?’

‘Well,’ said the miller, ‘I don’t rightly know as he’d come up; not a lot.’

‘No?’ said Uncle Borge.

‘He was somewheer about, I mek no doubt,’ said Mr. Hick. ‘Thee may’st bet thy head he was up to summat even i’ them days.’

‘Ah, to be sure!’ said Uncle Borge, with the air of a man convinced by abstruse argument. A second supply of beef for Mr. Hick and of mutton for Uncle Borge arriving simultaneously, the discussion was allowed to slumber. The miller welcomed this diversion, not being so sure of the company as he would

have been at the King's Arms at Quarrymoor. The Vicar daunted him a little.

'Now, Miss Donne,' said Mr. Hick, raising his glass in the next pause, 'I mightn't see thee again not afore Christmas; an' so, here's a merry Christmas an' a happy New Year to thee an' thine. Mrs. Donne, ma'am, I drink to you. My respects to *you*, sir,' to the Vicar; 'Missis, to Mrs. Hick, 'my opinion on you.'

'James 'll allays tek a chance for a merry word,' said Mrs. Hick, apologetically, to the Vicar.

'And why not?' asked the Vicar. 'Mr. Hick, I follow your example, and drink to the general health of the whole table. Ladies and gentlemen, a merry Christmas and a happy New Year.' Everybody sipped in answer to this sentiment, and George, glass in hand, murmured in Ethel's ear—

'A happy New Year, Miss Donne.'

Ethel turned and answered, 'A happy New Year.'

She had caught his tone of voice, as sympathetic people often do, and she half-whispered

the words, with a smile. He ventured on what he had never done before, and, first touching her hand beneath the table and finding it unwithdrawn, he clasped it in his own. She made a faint, a very faint, effort to remove it; and, he resisting ever so slightly, she let it rest for a brief second or two. After that she sate in a pleasant confusion, whilst Uncle Borge and Mr. Hick talked about the 'staät o' traäd' and kindred matters.

'Our Borge,' said the stout lady in blue, ' 'ud sit an' talk all night if a body'd let him.' Thin Uncle Borge took this as a signal to be gone, and arose in obedience to it. The other guests followed his example, but George dared to linger. Ethel had thrown a shawl about her head and had run out to the gate to repeat her wishes for a merry Christmas. The friendly voices burthened with the local drawl came back, borne down the snow-covered lane on the clear air with a genial crispness in the tone, when George emerged in his great-coat from the house and intercepted Miss Donne's return. Perhaps Miss Donne was willing to

have her return intercepted—perhaps she had even run out of doors for a purpose of her own. How would the clumsy male creature make chances for the utterance of his sentiments in this sort of case unless he were assisted?

‘You’ll wish me a merry Christmas, won’t you, Miss Donne?’ asked George.

‘Yes,’ said Ethel, ‘a merry Christmas.’

‘And a happy New Year?’ the young man asked.

‘I shall see you again before the New Year,’ she answered.

‘Won’t you wish me a happy New Year?’ he asked again. ‘Won’t you *give* me a happy New Year?—the happiest new year I ever had in my life!’ Ethel murmured an inaudible something—she herself scarcely knew what. But she knew that by this time she was in George’s arms, and that he was working with the fingers of one hand to free her face from the shawl which obscured it. When he had achieved that object he kissed her, and the tenor voice murmured at her ear, telling how

long George had loved her and how dearly, and how it should be the one effort of his life to make her happy, and calling her his angel and his darling. It is quite a commonplace sort of matter to write about or to read about in a novel, and George did it all in the orthodox manner ; but it is curious to notice how fresh it is when one meets with it outside books. With George it was perhaps more a matter of the youth of blood than a matter of the affections ; but, as I have said already, some people do not find nobility of sentiment a necessary appurtenance to love, and he was at least more in earnest than he had ever been before, and meant all he said ; and could not, indeed, find words to say a hundredth part enough. Ethel had no need of any words of her own just then. She could let her lover speak for both, and his words were sweeter than sweet. But at last—and the whole thing lasted scarcely more than a minute—George felt his kisses answered once, only once, and she was gone. He went homewards triumphing ; and, what with his triumph and the clear exhilarating air, he felt so full

of life and gladness that he must needs run at full speed every now and again, so that the four miles between himself and home were covered in forty minutes, and he reached the Saracen bright and flushed, and looking for once in his life downright handsome. He greeted Dinah good-humouredly when he met her in one of the passages, and, pushing by, reached the little snugery—so unchanged, during this four-and-twenty years, that a picture of it drawn in the old days would still answer for it almost to a bottle—and there found Daniel scorching his thin legs before a rousing fire, and with fat white hands feebly encouraging his digestive organs, as on the night when we first saw him.

‘Father,’ said the young man, throwing off his overcoat and turning his face away a little, ‘I’ve news for you. I am engaged to be married.’

‘Ah!’ said the old man quietly. ‘Can the young woman keep thee?’

‘I hope to be able to keep the young lady,’ George answered in affront.

‘Engaäged to be married, beest thee?’ asked Daniel. ‘It’s a bit sudden-like, ain’t it, George, lad? Who is it? Maid or widder?’

‘The lady is Miss Ethel Donne, of Quarry-moor Farm,’ George answered.

‘I thought as theer was summat a-tekkin’ thee out to Quarrymoor,’ chuckled Daniel with an asthmatic wheeze. ‘Donne? I knowin’ the naäm, I thinkin’. Ah! John Donne, he was a farmer out theer. Is her a daughter of hisn?’

‘Yes,’ said George; ‘Miss Donne lives at the farm. She is an only child.’

‘I reckon her’ll be pretty warm, then?’ said Daniel.

‘Her mother has only a life-interest,’ said George complacently. ‘The farm is a freehold of more than three hundred acres, and she will have other property besides.’

‘Very well, then,’ said Daniel, with another asthmatic chuckle, ‘I’m ready to dance at the weddin’. I should like to live to nuss a grand-child o’ mine, though I don’t reckon on it. I’m a-gettin’ to be very old, George. I’m a-gettin’

main old. I'm three years i' front o' Jim Bonser, and they say as he's a-dyin'. Well, well, well! Tell Diner I want her.'

'Dinah,' said George, 'your father wants you.'

'What is it, father?' asked Dinah, entering quietly.

'Your brother George is engaäged to be married,' said Daniel; 'what d'ye think o' that?'

Here, as always, Dinah's secret stared her in the face. If she could but have claimed George for her child, and have given him a mother's sympathy and a mother's congratulations!

'Who is it, George?' she asked tenderly. He answered more kindly than he had spoken to her for years.

'Miss Donne, at Quarrymoer.'

'The young lady who plays the organ at church?' cried Dinah. 'Why, George, she's the prettiest gell in all this part o' the country.'

'Isn't she?' said George.

‘And such a good gell, too, from all I hear,’ said motherly Dinah. ‘Why, my dear, you *are* fortunate!’

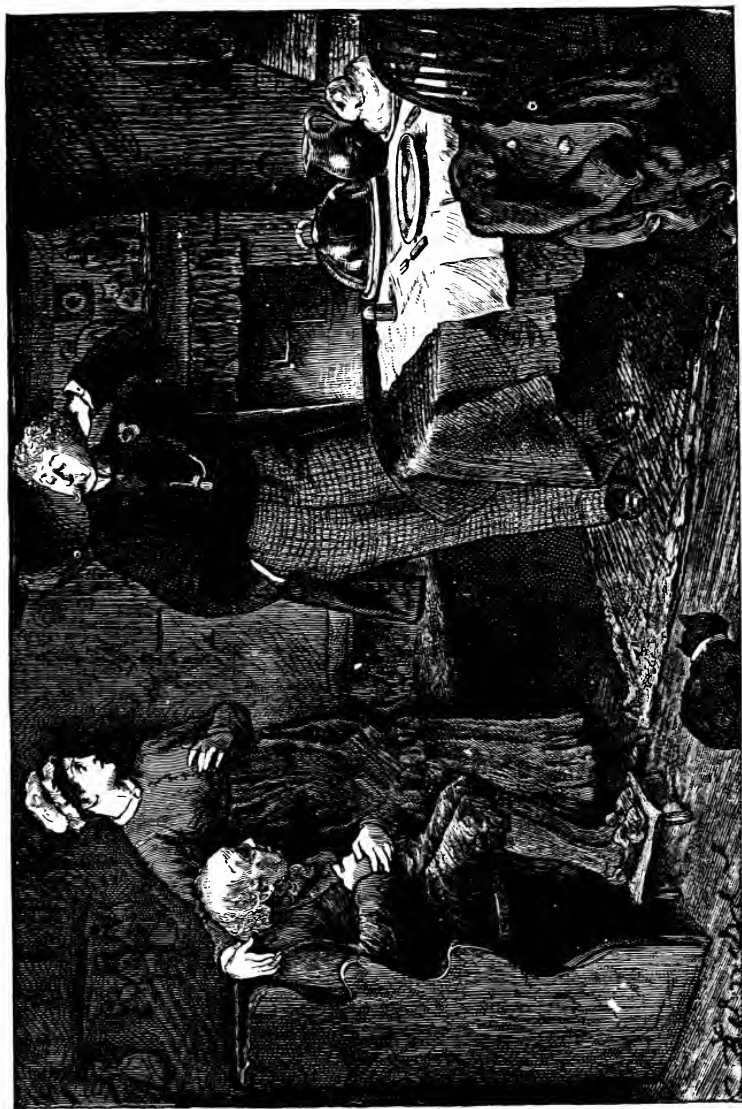
‘When be *you* agoin’ off the hooks, Diner?’ cried old Daniel. ‘I’m afeard, my gell, as you’ve overstayed your market.’

‘Yes, father,’ said poor Dinah, ‘I’ve overstayed the market.’

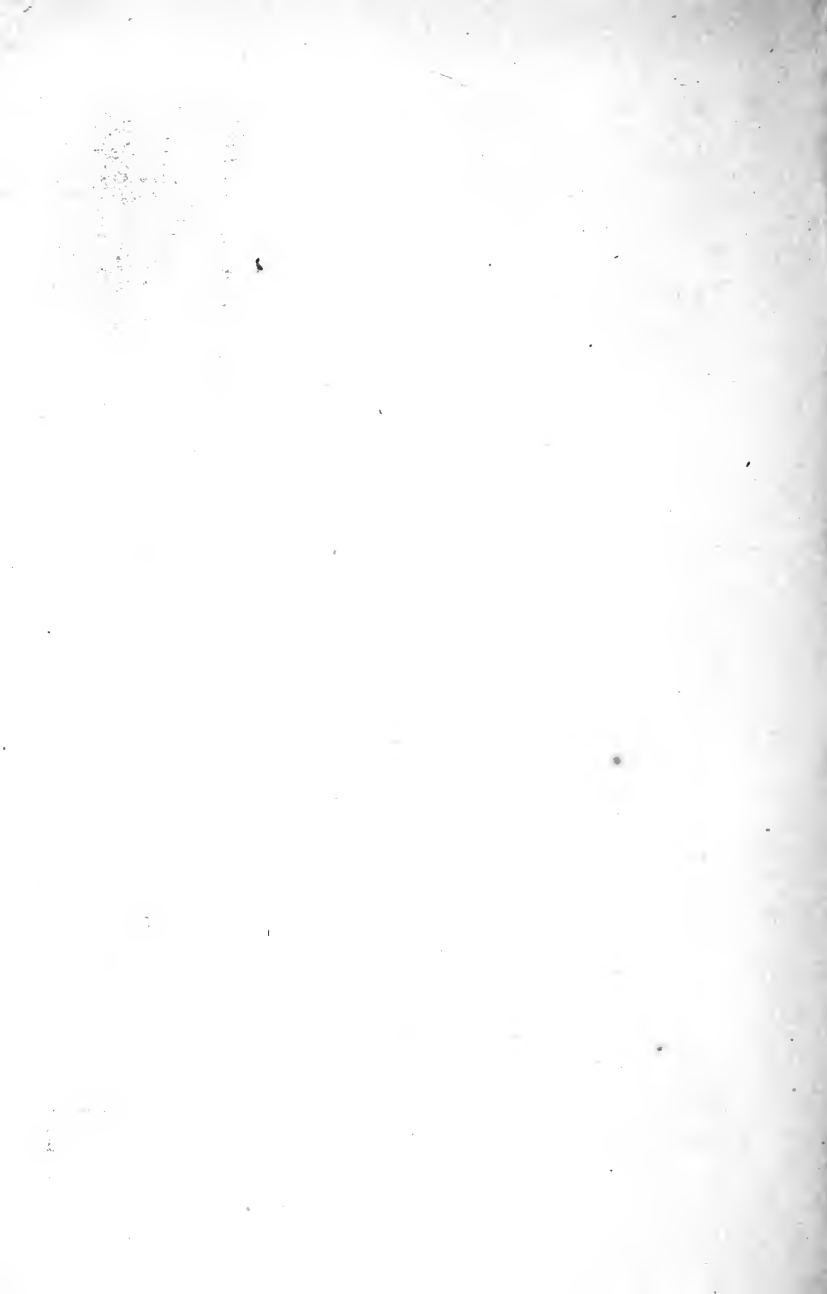
‘There’s no pleasin’ some folks,’ said her father. ‘You’ve had chance enough; but you’ve never seemed to tek a likin’ to none on ’em, ’cept p’raps as it was young Joe Bushell, an’ he’s been dead, I count, these ’ears and ’ears.’

Dinah had never even heard the errant Joe’s name since her mother’s death, ten years ago and more. You may guess what a wound the ignorant words made. But she was used to endurance, and she gave no sign.

‘If you’d ha’ struck up wi’ young Joe,’ said Daniel, ‘you’d ha’ been main rich now. An’ I shouldn’t ha’ sent you to bed wi’ your husband naked, if you had ha’ married. Joe’d ha’ had



‘Yes, father, I’ve overstayed the market.’



everythin' as George's master's got, an' at one time I thought you'd mek a match on it.'

What a very patent secret the two young people's love-making must have been, after all!

Dinah kissed George, and congratulated him with all her heart. The young man for once accepted her caresses, and she went to bed almost happy, but full of such thoughts as you may fancy. George himself was too excited to sleep for some two or three hours after getting into bed, and lay tumbling in a way which, under the circumstances, might seem unnatural; but George had a variety of subjects to think about, and the cross-winds and cross-currents of thought tossed the mental barque about rather wildly. For one thing, he was of course going to reform; for, in spite of the airs he had taken with his old companion, he could not lie alone in the darkness of the night thinking of Ethel, and fail to acknowledge that some small reforms in him were needed. To a conscience not over-tender, shilling pool may seem a sufficiently harmless entertainment, but one of George's vows was against its seduc-

tions. It was easy, by the aid of a little small betting, to lose a pound or two in an evening even at shilling pool ; and when a man of limited income tests his resources in that way five evenings out of six, he bids fair to get into trouble. In fact, George had borrowed a good bit of money, say a hundred pounds, over and above the ' debts of honour ' ; and though old Daniel was well-to-do, George was not too sure of getting money from him except by a method which, in the light of his own connection with Miss Donne, seemed unworthy of him. An only son ought, of course, to be welcome to take from a well-to-do father a share of what will one day be his own, and the young man had acted upon this principle with some freedom in bygone small emergencies. There are some things a man *must* take a bold face with, if he desire to have his own way and live in peace ; and conscience is one of them. George had been apt to deride the utterances of his inward monitor, accusing it of cant and oversusceptibility ; but somehow the accusations seemed at this time to stick in his throat, and

Ethel presided in a new court of conscience, and gave ruling against him on a hundred matters in which he had been apt to rule in his own favour. Well, he was going to be a new man and start afresh. It was unfair and injurious that, under the circumstances, he could not wipe the slate clean of the old record. His troubles were small enough. He was going to marry a wealthy wife, and would himself in due time inherit a nice little fortune. What has been done once may be done again, and George had borrowed already. To fill one hole he must dig another; and though the second hole must necessarily be a little larger than the first, it need scarcely be big enough to bury himself in.

Yet in a little while his debts worried him, and not without cause. Mr. Curtice, who was supposed to be a solicitor, and was a billiard-sharp, horse-chaunter, Jew usurer's tout, and so on, was a man who knew how to be exigent, and it was to him that George applied for help. Mr. Curtice was helpful first and exigent afterwards. George's life became a nuisance to

him. The billiard-sharping solicitor dogged him with threats of open proceedings ; and, as most of us know by experience, folly looks extra-foolish when threatened with detection, and mere peccadilloes in the dawn of exposure assume aspects mean and criminal. When, by way of miracle, we do see ourselves as others are likely to see us, we are rarely flattered. There was a way out of trouble which some people would have called mean ; but after all, when George had looked at it long enough, he felt the path a just one, and took it. There are actions by no means reprehensible, for the performance of which one desires a clear field ; and George, though he knew himself justified, wished for secrecy. His plan was simple—he had resolved to antedate possession of a little portion of his own : he was going, in short, to rob his father. Now, that is an action about which many theories may be constructed, and in this case there were many excuses for it. Daniel had greatly more money than he wanted ; George was his undisputed heir : and yet the old man was parsimonious. And whom is a high-

spirited young fellow to rob if not his own father? In brief, George silenced everything within himself, except a voice which seemed to belong to Ethel and would not be stifled.

In Daniel's bed-room stood a great, solid mahogany chest of drawers, dark with age and much polishing. The five lower drawers occupied each the full width available, but the two topmost divided the space between them. The right-hand drawer at the top held Daniel's cash-box, and was always locked ; but the left-hand drawer held nothing of value, and was always unsecured. When this left-hand drawer was taken clean out of the chest, a space was discovered (the mahogany partition rising only to half the needful height), through which any fairly slender hand might be introduced. Possibly some loose silver may have found a way of escape by this route aforetime. Anyway, George was familiar with the build of the furniture, and, being quite cornered, resolved upon the deed. Mr. Curtice had grown so noisy in his claim that the young man had made him an absolute promise for a certain Wednes-

day morning, and here came Tuesday night, and with it such courage as a coward can get out of desperation. The time was more than commonly favourable, for Daniel, to George's knowledge, had been keeping an unusually large sum in hand to meet an account which was to be called for on that very decisive Wednesday. Yet, when in the darkness of the night he crept from his own room to make the attempt he encountered an obstacle unlooked for, and, at first sight, fatal. The chamber door was locked.

Creeping quietly as a ghost, he tried the key of his own room and found it useless. Despair fell upon him for a while, and then out of it came new cunning and fresh resolve. At the back of the Saracen was a long and narrow garden, and beyond this garden lay a field; from the field led a little lane which ran at the back of a line of mean houses and ended in a dark by-street. George pulled on his boots, donned hat and coat, and, ostentatiously displaying himself in the bar, announced his intention of going out, and so swaggered away.

He plunged into the by-street, ran crouching down the lane, climbed the gate, slunk along the field, and in two minutes from the start stood in the Saracen's garden. The new plan was but a bolder development of the first. He had intended that an open bed-room window with a ladder placed against it should lead to the suspicion of such an entry as he was about to make, and the ladder was in proper position already. He mounted it in the darkness, pulled a diamonded pane easily out of the soft and flexible leaden frame which held it, and, having thrown back the catch, opened the window and crawled through into the room. Though he shook like the hound he was, it took but a moment to whip out the left-hand drawer; but his sleeve-links and the cuff of his overcoat caught at the upper and lower carpentry of the partition; and he struggled in vain to pass his hand thus cumbered.

This brought delay, and the delay carried with it the beginning of a tragedy.

'Dinah,' said Daniel, comfortably roasting his legs at the snuggery fire, 'tek my keys an'

fetch the cash-box.' One of the maids had asked for change.

Dinah went upstairs lightly; but a criminal person who at that second had laid his fingers on a cash-box in a corner difficult of access, heard the step and shook and sweated at it. His fingers, scrambling for a hold upon the box, played a sort of tattoo on the lid; but he clutched it, and drew it through the faulty partition; when with more noise—or so it seemed—than ever a key made, Dinah began to unlock the door. Clutching the box, George made for the window, and had already got his legs outside when Dinah opened the door, and, with a strange little cry, ran at him and seized him by the shoulders. A thief was much more likely to be afraid of Dinah than she of a thief.

It was hard on George to be thus disturbed at such a moment. The hysteric rage which is the coward's courage rose in him, and, feeling the ladder firm beneath his feet at that instant, he raised the cash-box in both hands in act to strike. But in the mere second for which she

had held him she had seen his face and read the truth. Before he could strike her she had fallen on the floor, and there she lay in a swoon, while George went shakily down the ladder, with failing knees, and ran, with the main bones drawn from the small of his back, along the garden; passed through the field, the lane, and the dark by-street, and, sweating and quaking and palpitating still, found himself by-and-by near a disused mine with the silence of the night about him. There, kneeling on the frosty grass, he set to work with a cold chisel, and, after barking his knuckles a little, succeeded in forcing the lid of the box. He had been in such a thievish fear and hurry until now that he never thought of the weight of the plunder, or collected his own thoughts so far as to guess how much he might have secured. Before the thing was done he had known how much he had expected to find; but now it came upon him with a dizzy sickness of remorse, and rebellion against his luck, that he had done the deed almost in vain. His thievish fingers—he felt that they were thievish—

prowling round and round the box, found in all some two dozen coins and one piece of bank paper. It was too dark for him to tell the difference between gold and silver, but, weighing the coins nervously in his moist hand, he thought them too light for gold, and his heart sank. If Dinah should tell of him! It is characteristic of a coward to grow a little murderous under such conditions.

Dinah stayed so long upstairs that Daniel, having once or twice called to her and received no answer, unwillingly took himself from the sphere of grateful warmth in which he sat, and found her lying in a dead faint beneath the open window. He tugged in alarm at the bed-room bell, and was so perturbed by his daughter's condition that for a full half-hour he forgot to think about the message upon which he had sent her. Then came the discovery. The open window, the ladder set against it, the displaced drawer, the faulty partition—all helped to tell the tale.

‘It eea’t much,’ said Daniel, ‘as the thief’s

got for his trouble, anyhow. Lucky for me, the sperit traveller called this arternoon !’

Dinah sat white and chill in the snuggery and listened to the talk and said nothing. It had been drawn from her that she had seen the thief.

‘Should you know him again?’ asked Daniel.

‘I couldn’t tell you who it was to save my life,’ said poor Dinah, forced into prevarication ; but after that she held her tongue, and her agitation was so plainly to be seen that Daniel and his guests forbore to trouble her further.

George threw the empty cash-box down the disused mine, and heard it go clanging with a thousand hollow echoes at the sides until it fell with a dull splash into the gathered water at the bottom of the shaft. Then he went to the Dudley Arms, quaking still, but counterfeiting jollity, and overdoing it a little. A glass or two of brandy set him on his feet again, and he was able to look things in the face with open eyes. He was horribly afraid that Dinah might have recognised him ; but the hurry and the

darkness were in his favour, and he was in the bed-room so soon after having left the house by the front way, that even if she had thought the thief resembled him she had probably dismissed the fancy. Then, neither she nor Daniel knew of his debts. However that might be, his *coup* had failed, and he had made but nine pounds towards the necessary hundred and eighty.

CHAPTER X.

GEORGE naturally felt himself affronted by fate. When a high-spirited young man finds himself compelled by circumstances to do a mean thing, it is hard that his unwilling baseness should be of no avail to him. The bargain he had made was that for a little less than two hundred pounds he should become despicable. He *had* become despicable—he knew it and felt it—but he had been robbed of his bargain. He had been ready to be ashamed of himself for a full cash-box; it was additionally shameful to have to be ashamed for one that was nearly empty. His righteous anger even sustained him against the assaults of conscience. Indeed, he had other things to think about than the upbraidings of the inward voice.

There was Curtice's money to be paid. Curse Curtice ! That, with all the changes rung upon it, was well enough as a momentary relief, but it brought no lasting balm to George's heart. It was nice to curse Curtice : it would have been delicious to maltreat him, if the thing could have been done safely ; but then the creditor was a big man with a taste for boxing ; and, even if it had been possible to thrash him, the debt would still remain unpaid, and George's signature at the bottom of the bill unobliterated. George confessed to himself in the form of Shylock's taunt to Gratiano : rage as he would, he could not rail the seal from off the bond. If only somebody else who hated Curtice as much as he did would run the risk of poisoning him ! But there are some things altogether too desirable ever to come true.

Even at five-and-twenty a sleepless night results in pallor ; and wrinkles, hitherto lying invisible upon the skin, as secret writing upon paper, start into life. The hollow clang of the empty cash-box as it beat from side to side of the mine, and the final splash it gave at the

bottom, made no good sleeping-music. Daniel, in these late days of life, did not rise for breakfast, and on the fateful morning when the inconvenient Curtice was decisively to be met, even Dinah did not appear until George's meal was nearly over. When she entered the room it was plainly to be seen that she also had passed but a poor night. Of all the griefs she had suffered, this new one was the heaviest and the hardest to endure. She had been praying and crying all night, as women do, and she was sore perplexed. Could she do anything to save her child from the pit to which he seemed to be hastening? Dare she warn him? Dare she acknowledge her last night's recognition of the thief? Would such an acknowledgment serve to scare him from his evil courses, or would it drive him into recklessness? She would perhaps have dared to tell him of her knowledge, but that her shame and its anguish seemed too great already to bear increasing by a spoken admission of them.

George felt that it would appear odd in him if he made no allusion to an incident so unusual

as a robbery at the Saracen. But it was hard for him to find words which should sound commonplace, and harder still to speak them unconcernedly.

‘I couldn’t make head or tail of the governor’s yarn last night, Dinah,’ he said at last, having twice or thrice cleared his throat. ‘Did you see the fellow?’

His back was half turned to her, and the newspaper he held was so arranged as to conceal his face. He knew the stroke a bold one—it was so bold that his heart seemed to stop whilst he made it—but nobody fights more pluckily than a coward in a corner, though his strokes are sometimes wild enough to damage himself rather than his adversary. Dinah gave no answer.

‘Can’t you hear?’ asked George, rustling his newspaper angrily and turning his back fairly upon her. He felt that she was looking at him, and he heard her feet moving slowly on the sanded floor. ‘Did you see the fellow? Hang it all! I suppose it hasn’t quite frightened your wits away!’ If he had but a chance to

seem ill-tempered she might miss his agitation.

‘Did you see him?’

‘Yes,’ said Dinah, in a whisper. It would be difficult to tell in whose ears the whisper sounded more terrible—his or hers.

‘Should you’—said George, with his back still turned to her—‘should you know him again?’ He poured a cup of tea over the table-cloth as he asked the question. Before it was answered Dinah stood in front of him, and he could feel that she was looking at him still. ‘What’s come to you?’ he asked with a sickly pretence of contempt. ‘Can’t you speak?’ He dared not raise his eyes. ‘Should you know him again?’

‘Yes,’ said Dinah, and then for a second or two their eyes met, in spite of him.

He tried to ask ‘Who was it?’ but his voice failed him. He tried to brave her look and his own quailing heart, but they bore him down, and he stirred at an empty cup and pretended to drink from it. Dinah began to cry, and, in the shame and grief which oppressed her, could think of nothing better than to run

away. George's knees were so weak for a moment that he could not rise. To have failed and then to have been detected was unusually hard measure, and the detection made everything else look awkward. Dinah had not told so far, but the young man did not know how long he could count upon her forbearance. If his debts should become known at home, there would be a row of course, and Daniel Banks most assuredly would not pay them, though he might use a father's privilege, and be excessively disagreeable about them.

Curtice was lounging in the road when at last George left the door of the Saracen.

'Good morning, Mr. Banks,' said Curtice, civilly enough, to look at.

'When did I promise to pay you?' asked George with intentionally offensive magnificence. 'I'm not the sort of fellow to cringe to a hound like this,' said George internally, 'simply because I owe him money.' And to do him justice, he never cringed except where thrift might follow fawning. It was hopeless to cringe here, and he knew it.

‘Twelve to-day,’ said Curtice.

‘Then, don’t bother me till twelve to-day,’ said George, walking on.

‘All right,’ said Curtice, quickening his step to keep alongside, ‘I can’t wait any longer, mind.’

‘Don’t trouble yourself,’ returned the debtor, ‘until you’re asked to wait.’

‘All right,’ repeated Curtice, dropping a step behind. ‘Twelve to-day at the Dudley. George marched on, and the creditor, stopping to light a cigar, murmured to himself his belief that he would get his money, after all. But in the debtor’s heart, fear and desperation sat side by side, and altogether his emotions were unenviable. He had two hours and a half in which to find the sum required. Not to find it meant open shame, and nobody knew what of evil consequences beside. His employer was a man of notorious strictness, and his father was the last man in the world either to condone or remove the ground of offence.

When the Rightful Heir to old Joe Bushell’s fortune reached the house of the Wrongful Heir

who held the fortune, he found that his employer had been called away to London on urgent business, and had gone up by the night train, leaving behind him a letter of instructions. He would either be down again that night, or would forward fresh orders. George sat down before the fire to think, holding the letter in his hand. The kind of grief which had fallen upon him is noticeable for always occurring at the wrong time. There was a perfectly dark horse he knew of, which would infallibly have pulled him through this had it happened two months later. The dark horse was the dearest of all dead certainties, and was really to be relied upon. He stood already to win three hundred pounds upon this animal's achievements, and if by any means it were possible to keep Curtice off until the race was won, George was safe. But Curtice would only be held off by being paid—an impossible condition.

The sight of means to do prompts to the deed. Young gentlemen holding situations of trust, and finding themselves in unpleasant corners, have sometimes made a way of escape

by the betrayal of their trust. 'George Bushell,' written in a laboured heavy hand, stared at George Banks (who was George Bushell without knowing it) from the paper he held in his hand. It was not a difficult signature to imitate. When George took up a sheet of note-paper and, laying it over the letter, set the two against a window pane and traced the signature with a lead pencil, he did nobody any wrong. When, seating himself at the table, he elaborately painted-in the clumsy up and down-strokes in ink, he was still quite within the pale of the law. Despair made experiments, that was all. Forgery is a dangerous game to play, as any young gentleman of business cultivation knows. And yet—George Bushell's business had drifted, bit by bit, so completely into the hands of George Banks, and the young fellow had so exclusive a control of things, that it might be easy to conceal it until the dark horse should have time to extricate him from his difficulties. And there was no denying that the imitation before him was complete enough to deceive a casual

observer. Curtice could not be put off any longer. If Ethel were pressed, there was no reason why she should not marry him a month or two sooner than the date she was already willing to fix, and in that case old Daniel would come down pretty handsomely for house and furniture. Then, having ready money for house and furniture, it was possible to go in debt for them even if the dark horse failed, though that of course was nonsense.

The imitation of the signature was admirable. They were written with the same pen and the same ink and on the same sort of paper. George cut the two out and shook them in his hat, and found it a difficult thing to say which was his own and which his employer's, until he detected on the back of the imitation the trace the pencil had left in pressing upon the paper.

At twelve o'clock that day Mr. Curtice was paid. George had unwittingly signed his own name, and had illegally secured a little portion of the property to which he was legally entitled.

‘In for a penny, in for a pound,’ is a very good maxim in its way. Since the dark horse—whose name, by the way, was Erebus—was good for three hundred pounds in the fulness of time, it was scarcely worth George’s while to forge a cheque which was merely large enough to cover Curtice’s claims. He impawned the whole of the dark horse’s future earnings, and had something over a hundred pounds in hand. Curtice was discreet, and nobody except the people concerned had any knowledge of George’s late indebtedness. At the Dudley Arms that evening the young man shone resplendent, and his luck took a turn which was nothing short of wonderful. There might be a way to wealth even in shilling pool if a man could always win at it. George took his success as an omen of good fortune. His luck had turned. He needed some sort of consolation for the miseries which hung over him, though they only occasionally touched him. Dinah’s secrecy never seemed certain for a moment, and for a dashing young man, whose social qualities and personal appearance were

so widely admired, it was unpleasant to have to be carefully civil to a sister who might in any moment of pique draw down ruin. It was not in him to understand how impossible such a betrayal would have looked to Dinah's eyes. The woman whose heart through all these dreary years had been faithful to the lover of her girlhood was in one hemisphere and he in another, mother and son though they were. If you ask me from whom George inherited his nature, I own that I cannot tell. For the lost Joe, though invertebrate, was a lad of good impulses and an honest and gentle nature, and George's mother was as loyal and true a creature as ever wore woman's shape. That says much, and is intended to say much. But every beast, as young Joe had years since told the Reverend Paul, acts after its own instinct and judges after its own nature, and George judged his mother by the only standard he had; and the result of his judgment made him tremble for his own safety.

It may have been some grace in him, it may have been the weather, it may have been

the seductive force of shilling pool which held him from Ethel's presence for three or four days after the settlement of Curtice's account. But the Sunday afternoon being fine, he walked over to Quarrymoor, not unassailed by qualms of conscience. For there is something in the presence of a good woman with whom a man is in love which seems almost to detect the past committal of any wrong by her lover. Even a little thing reproaches under such circumstances. I remember how guilty last night's game at loo used to look when I was first in love and met Beauty and Grace and Goodness in the chapel porch on a Sunday morning. To be in love makes the conscience tender, and love's pure eyes seem so to look through a man that he can scarcely think of hiding anything from them.

By this time Ethel was far enough advanced in love to run eagerly forward at the sight of George's broad-shouldered and well-knit figure, and met him at the gate. She was no more a mere receiver of caresses, but had learned—quite easily—to caress. And in her inmost

heart she thought George the handsomest, the cleverest, the most modest, the most honourable of men. Oh, the pity of it, Iago ! the pity of it !

On this particular Sunday she ran out to meet him at the gate, and they walked indoors together demurely enough. But once inside the dimly-lighted hall, George stooped down to kiss her, and she put both her arms about his neck and kissed him back again, with no pretence of coyness. Pretences of any sort were rather out of this young lady's way, and for some reason or no reason she was full that day of an unusual tenderness and gentle gaiety which made her face at once soft and arch, so that her lips moved gently with deep feeling and her eyes laughed at the same moment for innocent gladness of heart. A compound mood, which I am pleased to believe is not uncommon to good girls who are in love ; and a mood in which even a plain woman would be downright delightful even to a dull lover.

There is no finer armour than egotism, but even egotism has crevices that a needle can be

got through by chance or skill. George was well-protected, but for once he was wounded, and the needle pricked so deep and keen that the tears sprang into his eyes.

‘I’m not worthy of you, my darling,’ he whispered. ‘I’m not worthy of the love you give me.’

He really meant it, and saw for a second or two how true it was. Love is a continual worker of miracles.

‘George!’ cried Ethel in a wounded voice. Who has the right to depreciate a woman’s idol? Even the oracle himself is no oracle if he dare to tell her the truth about his own right to her worship. But of course his humility was beautiful, and of course she loved him the more for it, if that were possible.

‘I don’t believe,’ said George, ‘that any man would be worthy of your love.’ The proposition set forth in this general manner became a compliment, fitly to be answered by a kiss, which meant amongst other things—

‘I am not worthy of *you*. You are worthy

of a queen. And as for men in general, I believe you.'

In her mixed mood of gaiety and tenderness she charmed the young man from his self-accusing thoughts. They were never likely to abide long with him, and by-and-by, seeing how favourable the time was, he began to urge her about the hastening of the wedding-day. She resisted him—he asked for reasons—she had none to give—and, in short, he won in a canter. They settled it between themselves—with her mother's consent, they would be married in two months' time. At the tea-table George laid the new scheme before Mrs. Donne, who, apart from a vague opposition on the score of dresses to be made, had no objection to offer. She liked the young fellow, and thought that he and her daughter made a pretty pair. She had, besides, a strong dislike to lengthy waiting in a case like this where two young people who were old enough to do it had thoroughly made up their minds.

That night in church George turned things over in his mind. His employer was back

again, and had displayed no more curiosity than common about the conduct of recent business. There would come an overhauling of the pass-book and so forth by-and-by, and George would have that in his own hands and would make his return for his employer's inspection. Nothing seemed less likely than discovery, if only the hole he had made could be filled up in the space of a month or so. To leave it open would be inevitably to tumble into it. But now, with the marriage definitely arranged, everything would go well, and he would never be fool enough to peril his safety again. Ethel on her marriage would surely come into possession of some little ready money, and old Daniel was certain to behave pretty handsomely. George had in his breast-pocket at that moment something over a hundred pounds in notes, and as he thought things over, staring at the Vicar in rapt attention to his own affairs, he decided that it would be well to put the money into safe keeping.

‘Ethel,’ he said, when, in the interval

between church and supper, they sat alone in the parlour, 'I want you to do me a favour.'

'Yes?' said Ethel, smiling in anticipation.

'Put your hand into this pocket,' said George, holding his coat open, 'and see what you'll find there.'

Ethel did as she was told, and brought out a bundle of five-pound notes. Holding the bundle in her hand, she looked inquiry at her sweetheart.

'I'm not an economical man by nature,' said the young man, 'but I've begun to save a little for an event you know of, and that's my first achievement.'

'What a sum of money!' said Ethel.

'Yes,' replied George, 'more than a hundred pounds. Now, that goes towards house-keeping.'

'Yes!' said Ethel, quite delightedly.

'At least,' explained the young man, with greater caution, 'that is what it's intended for at present. But I have embarked in a business transaction which may call for capital at any moment. Except for that, I am resolved not

to touch it. Now, if I keep it myself I shan't keep it long, I know, for I am a dreadfully extravagant fellow.'

'You are too generous,' said Ethel.

'Well—I am,' responded George, with the air a man generally puts on when admitting that sort of failing. 'But I want you to keep the money for me, so that it can only be used for one of two specific objects.'

'You want me to keep it for you?'

'Yes. If I bank it, I can go and draw it out when I like, and I don't want to be tempted. But if it's once in your hands, I can only draw it at actual need. You'll be my banker, won't you?'

'Suppose,' said Ethel, 'that it should be stolen?'

'Nonsense, my darling,' said George. 'Lock it in a drawer upstairs.'

'Oh,' said Ethel merrily, 'it would be easy for a burglar to put a ladder against the window and get into the room that way in the dark.' George said nothing. 'And suppose,' said Ethel, 'that I should just be running into the

room at the time, and should be frightened out of my wits for ever. Wouldn't *that* be dreadful! Why, George, what's the matter? You are ill!

'No,' said George. 'A little twinge. Nothing to speak of. There! I'm all right again.' But his cheeks, which commonly kept a remarkable bloom, all things considered, were chalky in their hue, and his stare was a little ghastly. Ethel's imagination could scarcely have led her to a theme less pleasant for her lover's ears. Yet, how was she to know that? Even George saw clearly that he had started at a shadow which he himself had thrown. 'Don't let anybody know about the money, Ethel,' he said, a second or two later. Her chance speech had made him timorous, and he began to fear lest a word about the trust he had reposed in her should lead to suspicion and detection. 'Let nobody know,' he urged; 'keep it a secret. Will you promise.'

'Yes,' she answered, somewhat surprised by his vehemence; 'I promise.'

'Run away upstairs with it,' said George,

with an unsuccessful smile. 'Don't let it be seen.'

'He is nervous about *me*,' thought Ethel. She was sure that in his own behalf he was as bold as a lion; but it was evident that he could not even bear to think of danger approaching her. If that reflection should seem a little self-conscious on the girl's part, remember that she was in love. Of course it was sweet to think that even the thought of a possible danger for her could so move him. Love, as I have said already, is a rare epicure!

Ethel ran upstairs and locked the notes into an old-fashioned little cabinet which had a transparently undeceptive secret drawer. She kissed the bundle before she put it away—not, you may be sure, because it was worth more than a hundred pounds. It was worth a great deal more than many hundreds of pounds to her, because she thought she saw in it the fruit of effort and glad self-denial for love's sake. Love had earned it, so she thought; love gave it; it was to help love to live gracefully. No miser ever hugged money so gladly, and no spendthrift

ever thought less of its practical value. George was waiting below, and was feeling a good deal unhinged when she returned.

‘My darling,’ she said, ‘you haven’t been frightened by my silly speech about myself?’

‘No, dear, no!’ said he with an effort.

‘It was very silly for me to hint at such a thing,’ said Ethel. ‘You won’t like me to keep the money now.’

George with a coward’s courage turned upon the situation, so to speak, and struck out at it.

‘My dear, I confess that the suggestion alarmed me. Shall I tell you why? It’s a very singular coincidence, but my sister was alarmed last week in the very way you indicated.’ Ethel was astonished, and he related the incident with dramatic force. It was a good move, or so he told himself. Ethel and Dinah were growing companionable. His sweetheart would be sure to mention the story to Dinah, and she, learning that he had told it, would find her suspicions shaken by the very effrontery of the thing. And in any case Ethel would be still

less inclined to believe any horrible future accusation against him, since he himself had voluntarily alluded to the tale.

Days went on, and Erebus came into the light and became a favourite. When George had backed the dark horse, he was going begging at thirty to one. Now it was a hard matter to get three to two against him. George felt that this turn of fortune was absolutely providential. But it happened one dull afternoon, when Mr. Bushell was prowling about amidst the fragments in the waste-paper basket, looking for a scrap small enough to light his pipe with, that he made a discovery. And here it may be noticed that people who commit offences against the law are constantly guilty of the most surprising stupidities. The least capable of the human race are forgers and murderers. They go about with an infantile simplicity to make avenues to detection. They leave trails behind them which even the police have not the ingenuity to miss. And Master George had positively left undestroyed the real signature from which he had made his first

rough copy, and the copy itself. Slow George Bushell was about to burn his fingers by attempting to light one of these tiny scraps at the fire. The larger scraps were of no service or value, but it was part of his character to save useless things. As he was gingerly pushing the scrap of paper through the bars, he caught sight of the writing upon it, and, lifting it nearer to his eyes, read his own name. There was nothing very peculiar about it at first sight, but yet—why should anybody have cut off his signature from the tail of a letter? And here was another bit of paper lying on the hearth-rug, which being picked up also proved to have his name written upon it, apparently by his own hand. Not quite suspicious yet, he turned them over, and after a minute's inspection he made the discovery George had made a little while before. One of the signatures had been traced with a pencil. The real signature, having been firmly pressed against the glass, bore no mark; but the other, lying on a softer surface, bore the impress clearly.

‘Why,’ said Mr. Bushell in his own wooden

and deliberate manner, 'if somebody ain't been a-practisin' my autygraph!' His long clay pipe dropped from his fingers and broke in pieces on the fender, and at that moment, with premonitory tap at the door, his confidential secretary entered. The old man looked at him and arose slowly. His inexpressive countenance bore no greater mark of annoyance than almost any man might have shown at even so trifling an accident as the breaking of a pipe. 'I shall be out this afternoon, Mr. Banks,' he said, as he passed the unconscious George.

'Yes, sir,' said he in answer. 'About that thousand tons of Heathen? Can Dunn and Bollinger have it at the price?'

'Why, yes,' said Mr. Bushell, 'delivered at the wharf, mind you.'

'Very good, sir,' said George; and away went his employer to the bank, where he was closeted with the manager whilst the guilty youngster, not knowing what had befallen him, was leisurely apprising Messrs. Dunn and Bollinger of the fact that their price was accepted.

‘You’ve kep’ all my cheques, I suppose,’ said Mr. Bushell; ‘all as has been sent in this ‘ear, anyhow?’ The manager answered ‘Yes,’ and in a little while the cheques were produced.

‘I never drawed this,’ said Mr. Bushell, with unusual emphasis, laying a heavy hand flat on a draught in favour of ‘Self’ for three hundred pounds.

‘It was presented in the ordinary course by Mr. Banks, sir,’ said the manager.

‘Was it?’ asked the Wrongful Heir half jeeringly, half angrily. ‘Look here!’ And he unfolded the two crumpled bits of paper. The manager stared from him to them and from them to him. ‘Here’s somebody been a-practisin’ my autygraph.’

‘Dear me!’ said the manager fatuously. He had, like other men, heard of forgeries, but they were outside the sphere of his experience until now.

‘Ah!’ said Mr. Bushell scoffingly, ‘an’ dear *mè*, too. Three hundred pound! If it’s young Banks, and it looks like it—don’t it?—if it’s him as I took such notice of an’ took such a

fancy to an' trusted—. . . Why, damn it, it's beyond believin'—ain't it?'

'Very extraordinary indeed,' the manager responded. 'You can swear that you never signed this cheque, sir? The signature is remarkably well imitated.'

'Swear it!' said Mr. Bushell. 'I'd swear it on my dyin' bed.'

'We must proceed with caution, sir,' said the manager, beginning to relish this new mental flavour as he grew accustomed to it. No sport so enjoyable as man-hunting, when once you get your hand in. 'A false arrest would set the real criminal on his guard, and he might get clean off. We must be cautious, sir.'

'Cautious!' said the other, with a heavy jeer. 'Cautious, when I find these in young Banks's room, where nobody ever goes but him an' me!' He held the crumpled scraps in the manager's face. 'Cautious, when young Banks come to the bank himself an' drawed for it! He was cautious to some tune, he was. I'll caution him! You send for a policeman.'

One trifle and another had kept the guilty George from looking at the sporting news in that day's paper, but having finished his reply to Dunn and Bollinger, he sauntered out for the local journal, and returning leisurely, found on opening the sheet that Erebus was established as first favourite. In his rejoicing at this happy condition of affairs he arose and waltzed softly round the room, and snapped his fingers smiling. He had always felt so sure about Erebus that it was most flattering on the horse's part to come to the front in this way. He sat down beside the fire in the chair his employer was wont to use, and gave his mind to pleasant fancies. There was a sense of thanksgiving in his mind. And he was quite persuaded that he was never again to be such a fool as to run the risk of being mistaken for a criminal. For of course he had only been borrowing the money, and yet people are so stupid that discovery would have stamped him with indelible disgrace. As for the affair of the cash-box, that wore an altogether different complexion. Daniel did not want the money,

and would not have really missed it even had the box been full ; and after all, a son has some right to consideration at his father's hands, and if a father is miserly, a high-spirited young man has his remedy. But happily there would be no further need for transactions of either nature. People are opinionated and given to jumping at false conclusions. To have had the forgery detected would have been excessively unpleasant, and it was comforting to know that he could restore the money.

Rat-tat-tat-tat at the front door. Then the door was somewhat violently opened. It clung a little in moist weather, and opened with a shivering jar of bolts and chain. Nothing at all remarkable in it, but somehow George noticed it, and will remember it all his life. Mr. Bushell's voice, sounding bullying and angry, cried, 'Come this way.' George whipped out of his master's chair and into his own, and in one second was so deep sunk in business that he did not even look up at the Wrongful Heir's noisy entry.

‘Officer!’ said the Wrongful Heir, with something of an inclination towards melodrama — ‘Officer, do your duty.’

‘I suppose you’ll come quiet and take it easy? There won’t be any need for these, eh?’ A quiet, gentlemanly-looking man, the local inspector, was holding up a pair of brightly burnished handcuffs.

‘Why,’ said George with a sick frost inside him, ‘what—what do you mean?’

‘Very sorry, Mr. Banks,’ said the inspector, ‘I wanted it done quietly out of consideration for you, and so I came myself. It’s a charge of forgery. Three hundred pounds.’ George lurched to his feet, and looked at the inspector in a ghastly agony and terror. ‘Mr. Bushell brings the charge. I should advise you not to say anything. You can if you like, but it may be used against you on your trial.’

George said nothing, less because of the official advice than because he could not have spoken a word just then if one word could have proved it all a dream.

‘That’s right,’ said the inspector genially. ‘Nobody’ll think anything of seeing you and me in the street together. This your hat? Come along.’

What a walk it was along the high street! What a nightmare the little formalities made in the room hung round with maps and cutlasses and handcuffs! What a sensation to remember when the official’s gentle hand insinuated itself into George’s pockets, and possessed itself of penknife and keys and purse and pocket-book! A corridor, a paved yard, a fustian-clad ruffian exercising there, who laughed and called him ‘mate’; and then—the cell. Lord Byron has told us that until the ear becomes more Irish and less nice, the sound of a pistol cocking at twelve paces is remarkable. The amazing old ladies who get into the papers on the strength of the fact that they have been two hundred times imprisoned for being drunk and disorderly may perhaps have grown used to another click which has a singular sound in the ear of a novice—the click of a key in the lock of a

police cell. But nothing much less than their experience can take the sting out of it. The sound seemed to run a little icy needle of despair into the criminal's marrow.

And Erebus was first favourite, after all.

CHAPTER XI.

THE English Law, being (at least in part) a civilised code, professes to deal with intentions as well as with actions. But before the law can deal with them, it is clear that the intentions must be pretty obvious. George had intended to pay back the money he had borrowed from his employer; but the intent was nowhere discoverable by the legal eye, and went for nothing. And yet Erebus was first favourite. Even a dull man may see how poignant an aggravation of the pain this was. If old Bushell had but kept quiet for a few more weeks, had been out of the way, had taken to his bed, had been blind—anything—the thing would have been over. For of course it was preposterous beyond the dreams of madness to suppose that a man in George's position

intended to let a danger like this hang over him a minute longer than he could help it. It was more than incredible that any man should barter freedom, good name, love, the Saracen, and the acres of Quarrymoor for three hundred pounds. And it was wilder than ever to suppose it when the three hundred pounds were to be got so cheaply and so easily.

Even a worm will turn. If you hunt any creature too hard, it will do its strong or feeble best to rend you. It was surely too bad to brand a young man of George's prospects as a felon, simply because for a week or two he had borrowed from another man's abundance. George turned and stood at bay against the situation. He resolved that through thick and thin he would swear to the end that George Bushell had signed the cheque and sent him to the bank with it, and had trumped up this charge to ruin him. He would defy experts, he would defy everybody. He swore to stand at bay, and if he fell, to fall with the look of a martyr. Perhaps—perhaps—his father or Ethel

might believe him, and he need not lose everything.

I am afraid this young man will take a good deal of moulding before he becomes respectable.

The news of the arrest went through the town like wildfire ; for George was a well-known figure, and his father one of the primeval citizens of the place, or so it seemed to modern fancies. Yet, far and wide as it travelled, the news halted at the door of the Saracen, and neither Daniel nor Dinah had yet heard it. That such a thing could be never entered the mind of Mr. William Bowker and his mates, the nightly frequenters of the Saracen's kitchen from time almost immemorial. Tummas Howl, very grey by this time, Aminadab, and Meshach, and Ebenezer, also grey, kept up the habits of middle age and youth, and (unless when engaged upon the 'night-shift') would have felt themselves homeless without the Saracen after working hours.

They had all heard the news, and met at the accustomed corner. For it is the habit in

the Black Country to drop into a public-house—though you have done it for a lifetime at the same hour every day—as if you did it by accident, and William and his comrades were not superior to this transparent pretence.

‘Well, chaps,’ said one, ‘this is a sad sort o’ come-down for poor ole Dan’l, eat it?’

‘Ah,’ said another, ‘it’s all that. It’ll be the finishin’ on him, I reckon.’

‘It eat to be tock for settled,’ said Mr Bowker, ‘as he’s done it. Not till he’s been afore the magistrate.’

‘Course not,’ they all assented.

‘Gooin’ to look in to-night?’ asked Meshach.

‘I think not,’ Aminadab answered.

‘Fellers!’ pleaded Mr. Bowker; ‘be we gooin’ to turn we backs on a friend cos he’s i’ trouble?’

‘Teeat likely,’ said Ebenezer, who commonly followed William’s lead.

‘For my part,’ said Mr. Bowker, ‘I’d sooner goo twice as often an’ drink twice as much, to keep their sperits up a bit.’

‘You’m i’ the right, Willyum,’ responded Ebenezer.

‘Then come on, chaps,’ said Friendship’s champion. ‘Tek no notice, and mek no differ. They’n like thee all the better for not seemin’ to know as anythin’s the matter.’

William’s lieutenant followed his lead, and the rest followed the lieutenant.

Dinah met them in the passage as they entered, and had her word for each. ‘Good night, William. Good night, Meshach,’ and so forth. She had known them since she was a baby.

Since young Joe’s departure, so many years ago, Dinah’s manner had always been a little tinctured by sadness, but in such a way that people took it rather for gentleness and tenderness than for sorrow. But latterly, and with good reason, she had been plainly sorrowful and depressed, and to-night she was unusually mournful. George, her boy, the baby she bore, her consolation, her fear, and next her sorest trouble, had never dared to face her since the morning after her discovery of his theft. And now he was away from the house all day long,

and kept away until it was closed at night. Only an hour ago Daniel had been storming about it, and vowing that he would get to the bottom of it, and the mother had broken into tears. The servant-girl who acted as kitchen waitress of an evening was engaged, and Dinah, who could scarce control her face from openly showing signs of heartbreak, served the men with her own hands.

‘Eh, dear me,’ said one when she had gone, leaving the ale upon the table, ‘her takes it plucky, but it’s bitter hard, poor creetur.’

‘Yis,’ said Mr. Bowker, with pretended cynicism; ‘trouble’s bitter hard whenever it comes.’

‘How’s poor Dan’l takin’ it, I wonder?’ said Aminadab.

‘Gorramity knows!’ William answered, and rising left the room.

‘He’s a sharp-tongued un at times, Willyum is,’ said Meshach, ‘but he’s a bit soft-hearted, too. I seed the tears in his eyes.’

‘Well, thee know’st,’ observed Tummas, who was the Nestor of the house, ‘Dan’l was as good’s a feyther to Willyum when he broke his

arm a-tryin' to save young Tummas, my neveu.'

In point of fact, William felt the position so keenly that he could not bear to sit in the house. He walked into the sanded passage, and there stood Dinah. Everybody knows how foolish it seems in little things like this to be detected in the act of going about without a purpose, and Mr. Bowker, who had walked away for no other reason than to hide an emotion of which he was ashamed, at once feigned an object and walked briskly up the passage. As he passed Dinah, he cast a furtive swift glance at her, and saw that she was crying.

'Mis'is,' he said, pausing at once before her, and forgetting his own advice at the sight of her tears, 'perhaps yo'd just as soon as we shouldn't stop to-night. Say the word, an' I'll turn 'em out in a minute. Yo mote think as we bain't friendly becos we come to-night. We thought yo'd like it better to look as if nothin' had happened.'

'Happened!' cried Dinah. 'What has happened?'

The truth flashed upon the man in a second, and he stood speechless.

‘What has happened?’ Dinah again demanded.

‘I niver thought,’ said he, ‘as it ’ud be my part to be the messenger o’ shaäm an’ sorrow i’ *this* house. It’s got to be known, howiver, soon or late.’

‘What is it?’ Dinah besought him with her hands upon her bosom. ‘Tell me.’

‘Your brother George is in prison,’ he answered.

‘No, no, no, William!’ said poor Dinah, grasping him with feeble hands.

‘God forgi’ me,’ said he, ‘as I should be the one to tell you, but it’s true. Bear it, missis, bear it, for the Lord’s sake. It’ll be the death o’ Dan’l, I doubt.’

‘Why? why?’ cried Dinah, wringing her hands together, ‘why is he put in prison?’

‘He mightn’t be guilty, mind you,’ began William. But Dinah laid hands upon him and looked at him so that he had pity on her beseeching face and panting bosom, and struck the

blow at once. 'He's charged with forgin' on his master for three hunderd pound.'

How long does it take to grasp a state of things like this and to form a resolution? The streets were pitch-dark, except for a glimmering lamp or two, which indeed rather set the darkness off than relieved it, and it was raining drearily. Dinah dashed into the roadway so swiftly that William, who had looked away from her whilst he gave the evil tidings, saw nothing of her but a waving skirt as she went through the doorway. Fearing mischief, though of what sort he scarcely dared to guess, he ran out after her, and saw the waving skirt again as she ran round the corner. He remembered suddenly that the canal lay in that direction, and rushed after her at full speed. She was running like a mad creature when he came up with her and laid a restraining hand upon her shoulder.

'Don't stop me,' she panted. 'Let me go.'

'No missis, not there,' said William, pleading with her. 'Not there.'

‘I must go,’ she cried. ‘It is the only chance to save him.’

She was going not only in the direction of the canal, but towards George Bushell’s house, and he saw a part of her purpose at once.

‘He’s as hard,’ said William, ‘as the nether millstone.’

‘I must go,’ was all that Dinah answered, and he released her, but followed close at her elbow. They had scarcely gone twenty yards when he pulled his coat off and threw it over her shoulders, but she let it fall, and he ran on with her, disregarding it. Down the road she sped, going so swiftly that it put the man to his best pace to keep up with her, and crossing the canal bridge turned sharply to the right, and held on until she reached the gate of George Bushell’s house. Whilst William rang the bell she pressed the palms of her hands against the gate twice or thrice, as if she made even to it the beginning of the appeal she had in her mind. A door was heard to open, and a step came crunching down the gravelled drive.

‘Keep it in, missis,’ said William, laying

his hand again upon her shoulder. 'Go to him quiet like. It's the best way, I'm sure.'

'Yes, yes,' she answered, laying her hands again and again upon the gate, as if it were sensible to her prayer and could answer it.

'Who's there?' asked a voice from within.

'I want to see Mr. Bushell,' said Dinah; 'I must see him.'

A sturdy woman opened the gate and answered,

'Is that you, Miss Banks? I'm afeard it's no use your coming. He's as hard as hard. I niver seed him s' angry.'

'I must see him,' said Dinah. 'Let me in. Don't tell him I am here. I must see him.'

Her manner was still urgent, but had on a sudden grown collected. Bootless as her errand might seem to others, she had a secret power in reserve, and began to feel its comfort. Perhaps the housekeeper felt something of the strange influence with which strong feeling in strong natures acts at times even upon the vulgarest hearts; or she may have been moved by some memory of Dinah's kindness in time

of trouble. She risked something at least in granting Dinah's wish, but she granted it.

'Come wi' me,' she said; and, leading the way swiftly into the hall, pointed to a door. 'In there,' she whispered, and whisked upstairs as a rabbit makes up-hill for his burrow.

Dinah turned the handle of the door and entered, leaving Mr. Bowker standing in his coaly shirt-sleeves in the hall. George Bushell was sitting by the fireside, pipe in mouth, looking woodenly respectable as of old. His face was flushed, but expressed the internal disturbance he felt in no other readable way. He was a temperate man as a rule, but on the strength of his secretary's unexpected defection from virtue he had been drinking. Whisky brings out a man's true nature, as for a minute or two you can see the real tones of an old picture by passing a sponge across it. He was naturally and bitterly indignant. He had helped to break four hearts to get his money, but he had never committed forgery, and of course he loathed the crime. He never knew how much until he found it practised on him-

self. And all this apart, he had liked George, and had done something to push him on in the world. He could never have been got to like anybody who was not of use to him, but George had been useful, and it had been pleasant to talk about his private secretary. The possession of a private secretary seemed to carry a sort of dignity with it, and a man naturally keeps his best regards for those people who are of advantage to him and reflect credit on him.

‘Hillo!’ he said, starting from his seat, and for the second time that day he dropped his long clay into the fender. ‘What brings *you* here?’

Dinah’s hair and face were wet with rain, and her dress was a little disordered. But she was something more than comely even under these conditions, and she had the great advantage of being a woman; so that Mr. Bushell felt the brutality of this welcome as soon as he had uttered it.

‘I have come,’ said Dinah, ‘to speak to you about George.’ She panted a little in her

speech, but otherwise she seemed wonderfully collected. 'I have come to ask you not to appear against him.'

'I'm very sorry for *you*, Miss Banks,' said the Wrongful Heir, with natural and excusable surliness, 'but the law must tek it's course.'

'There is a reason for my asking it,' said Dinah. 'Believe me, there is a reason. You must not go against him.'

'The matter's out o' my hands,' returned Mr. Bushell, 'an' I've got no more to do with it. I'm sorry for the young man's relations, but he should ha' thought about them afore he did what he did. It's out o' my power to move i' the matter, an' the law must tek its course.'

Saying this, he made a motion to leave the room, but Dinah set herself between him and the door.

'No,' she besought him. 'Let him go away and begin life again. If you knew what I could tell you, you would let him go.' Her hands, and her very body, besought him. 'Oh, let him go, Mr. Bushell. Let him go.'

Nobody's temper can last for ever, and it was hard to be pestered in this way after being robbed.

'I'll see him damn'd fust!' cried the Wrongful Heir, indignant at the monstrosity of the proposal. Dinah's life had been a sacrifice, and she could scarcely miss such a chance of self-torture for another's sake as the situation presented.

'Listen for a moment,' she said, laying such a grip upon the lappel of his coat when he strove to pass her that he could not disengage himself without violence. 'You can't send your own flesh and blood to prison.'

'*My* flesh and blood!' said George Bushell. 'Why, you're ravin'.'

'Listen to me,' said Dinah, clinging to him. 'He is your flesh and blood. He is your nephew Joseph's child.'

'What!' he said, falling back a step and drawing her with him.

'Before Joe went away,' she answered, speaking rapidly, 'him and me was married at Waston Church on a Whit-Sunday. George

is our child, and if he had his rights he'd have more than half your money, Mr. Bushell. But when Joe went away I never spoke a word about it, and nobody but mother knew.'

'That's a poor sort of a lie, missis,' said the Wrongful Heir. But all the colour of his face had faded, and he trembled in Dinah's hands.

'It's as true as heaven!' she answered. 'I kept it secret up to now, an' robbed him of his money all the while, but I won't see him sent to prison. All his grandfather left is his by right, but he shall never know it, an' never ask you for a penny. Let him go!'

Then she released him and fell upon her knees.

Young Joe's money had belonged to Uncle George so long that it had grown into him and become a part of him, no more to be taken away from him than heart or brains. And was it possible that now—after a lapse of four-and-twenty years—his hold upon it could be threatened? Strange things happen sometimes, and it fell upon the dull conscience of the old schemer like a blow to remember that, after

all, the wealth was wickedly gained, and might not prosper. For in his way he was orthodox, and, like the devils, he believed, but he had never trembled until now. This might be God's vengeance on him. He was a respectable man, and he had believed in God, theoretically, all his life. Now, belief began to take a practical cast, and, as revolutions of opinion will, it shook him. But dull and slow as he was, and staggered as he was by this amazing story, he was not long in seeing the tremendous flaw in it.

‘My brother Joseph,’ he said slowly, with some tremor in his tones, ‘was wu’th a quarter a million o’ money when he died. Now, that’s a deal o’ money, an’ my nevew Joseph was rightful heir to it if he’d been alive. If you are his wife, how comes it you never said a word about it? Answer me that.’

‘He took the marriage lines away with him when he left home,’ responded Dinah. ‘I parted with him on a Sunday—the day he hit Mr. Screed, and his mother ordered him out of house an’ home—and he promised me he’d

send 'em, but I never heard a word of him again, and now beyond doubt he's been dead these years and years. But George is his child, Mr. Bushell, his lawful child. You've got all his money. Be content with that. We'll never ask you for a penny, and his father'll pay you back the three hundred pounds. Let him go.'

He went untouched by her distress, for he had his own affairs to think of. He was never particularly accessible to other people's emotions, and now, if ever in his life, he was self-absorbed.

'You won't go against your own flesh and blood, Mr. Bushell!' said weeping Dinah, thinking that his silence gave a little hope.

He answered her out of his own nature.

'If you made a slip with my newew Joseph, that's your look-out.' She was on her feet before him in a second. 'You hid your shame pretty cunning,' he went on, 'an' you'd best ha' kept it hid.' He was not a wise man, and he disbelieved the story simply because it sounded improbable. He was ready enough

to believe that Dinah had tripped in her younger days, and that George Banks was his nephew's son, but he gave no credence to the story of the marriage and the lost 'lines.' At one moment he was on the edge of a question which might have wrecked his fortunes. The jeering query trembled on his tongue—why not go to the church at which the marriage took place and get a copy of the entry there? But there *was* just a chance that the tale was true, and he held his tongue, asking himself if such simplicity was believable.

Dinah stood before him with eyes suddenly brightened, and a flush of colour on her cheek.

'I am your nevew Joseph's wedded wife,' she said. 'We was married at Waston Church last Whit-Sunday was five-and-twenty years. And George was our lawful-born child; and if everybody had their rights, he'd have his grandfather's money. I don't want that. I only ask you to let him go.'

'I don't believe a word o' your tale,' he said slowly. 'If you could ha' proved it, you'd ha' done that long an' long ago. Whoever

he is, the law'll ha' to take it's course, an' if he was my own child, I'd do the same with him.'

'Will you take your three hundred pounds back again and let him go?' asked Dinah desperately.

It was a temptation to which his sense of public justice would have yielded before George was fairly in the hands of the police; but it was not to be thought of now. He knew nothing of the rules of criminal procedure, and believed himself already bound to carry on the prosecution.

'No,' he answered. 'He's committed a crime agen the law, an' he must suffer for it.'

'It shall be known,' said Dinah, growing more and more desperate as the failure of her mission became obvious. 'It shall be known as you know who he is. It shall be known far an' wide as you send your own flesh an' blood to prison. I kept it hid all these years, but I don't care now, and I'll have my rights as Joseph Bushell's lawful wedded wife.' He turned a little pale, but said nothing. 'If I

have to walk barefoot to the Queen herself,' said poor Dinah, weeping fast and speaking with a piteously broken voice, 'I'll do it. And if she makes a law o' purpose, she'll give me back my honest name an' give my child his lawful rights.'

There might be something in it after all, he thought, she stuck so to her point. All the more reason then to fight the matter out, and clear the pretenders off the ground. Old Daniel would never face the shame of a trial for his son, real or reputed, and George himself would be in prison. A wooden man, as I have said of him already. A dull, slow, unperceptive, unimaginative man. And yet he saw as if in a drama acted before him Daniel's flight of shame, and George's committal, and the popular discredit of Dinah's story, and he answered her.

'You're a-threatenin', are you? Then leave my house. I know my dooty, an' I've done my dooty all my life, an' I shall do it now.' He flung the door wide open. 'Get out, you baggage! I' my young days you'd

ha' had your legs i' the stocks for such a tale as you've brought to me.'

'Here, I say, Gaffer,' cried Mr. Bowker from the hall, 'draw it mild!'

'Hillo!' said the disciple of duty, peering at him savagely. 'Who's that? What do you do here?'

'I come along o' the lady,' answered William. 'That's what I do here. I tode her as yo' was a hard un, but I deea't expect to hear you go on i' that way.'

'Get out, the pair o' you!' shouted the old man wrathfully. 'I think you're i' my empl'y. Tek a minute's notice now an' leave it.'

'All right,' returned Mr. Bowker with sudden cheerfulness as of one who has received a gift, 'I've got the bag. Come along, missis,' he continued with a ludicrously sudden turn to notes of sympathy. 'I was afeard you'd mek nothin' out o' him. He's known for what he is—he is.'

His employer had the front door open.

'Get out!' he cried again. 'Bringin' a pack o' lies to me an' makin' yourself out no

better than you should be! Get out!' He boiled by this time with virtuous indignation.

'Ah!' cried Dinah's ineffectual champion. 'Shut up! Be ashamed o' yourself. To talk to a woman i' trouble like that! Why, y'ode rip, wheer's your bowels?'

They were on the doorstep, and George Bushell slammed the door behind them fiercely.

'If I knowed,' he growled, 'as it was true, I'd fight it every inch. It's all a pack o' lies, though—a pack o' lies!'

'Oh, William,' cried Dinah, wringing her hands in the darkness and the rain, 'what shall I do? What *shall* I do?'

The tears were in the soft-hearted fellow's eyes again, but he could offer her no comfort.

CHAPTER XII.

GEORGE had not long to wait for an opportunity to vindicate himself. The petty sessions were held the morning after his arrest.

A prison couch is rarely luxurious, even though a man be blessed with that approving conscience which is popularly and mistakenly supposed to make him quite easy in his mind. It is easy to be virtuously indignant about a scoundrel and his doings, but harder, much harder to understand him, to see things from his point of view, to comprehend his self-justifications, his excuses. To my mind, a scoundrel is much to be pitied for being a scoundrel. His detection and punishment are good things for him, and we who are virtuous may claim for his soul's good to see that the knots of the whip are drawn tight, and that a strong arm lays it on. But we are not without compassion

as he writhes. It is hard measure. Could he have exercised an unbiassed judgment to begin with, he would probably have chosen another lot than this.

But our young criminal was not yet converted to the ways of wisdom. The rat who has made predatory excursions after your salad oil is not converted when the avenging terrier gets him into a corner. He squeals, and bites if he can, and dies with the rat-pulses of him beating to the tune of despairing vengeance. George was very angry. He anathematised Bushell and Curtice and the spirit merchant whose half-chance call had so depleted the cash-box. Why did nobody come near him? Why was not his father here to offer bail until the morrow, and to show a little of that fatherly faith which, even if misplaced, was surely due to one whose guilt had not yet been proved? If they could not prove what he had done with the money, he tried to persuade himself that he might yet have a squeak for liberty. It was only Bushell's word against his, and he would face it out. In hours of

extremity you see safety in any foolish trifle. There was no reason why Curtice should talk, and if he held his tongue it was a point in the prisoner's favour. Ethel's silence, of course, was certain. Not even feminine spite at being disgraced could make her false to him. The poor wretch did love her, after all, as well as he knew how to love, and he could not think as ill of her as he did of everybody else. If his best conceptions of her were shameful to her—and they were—he gave her his best, and it was love that created them. Ethel would be staunch to him, and would not betray him. If he were found guilty, she might send the money back secretly to George Bushell, but until then she would hold it for him, and keep a still tongue. He did not upbraid himself for being a villain and a fool, but he upbraided circumstance for the hard measure dealt out to him. Only to have quietly borrowed three hundred pounds, with the most upright of intentions, and to lose Ethel, the acres of Quarrymoor, home, good name, the Saracen, Daniel's quiet but substan-

tial earnings,—the punishment and the offence seemed unequal.

There was a wise man in the East whose constant prayer it was that he might see to-day with the eyes of to-morrow.

The inspector lent the prisoner brushes and other necessaries in the morning, and even gave him a clean shirt, taking George's in return. There was no news from the Saracen, and the prisoner dared not send there, believing his father's silence due to Dinah's betrayal of the truth in that unfortunate affair of the cash-box ; or, at least, having fear enough of the betrayal to keep him from making even the slightest appeal to home.

How long the night had seemed, and how slowly the shackled feet of the minutes crawled along in the morning ! I have talked with an Englishman who was led out one frosty morning during the Carlist War to be shot, and who was standing at the head of the grave which had been dug for him, when he was released and set at liberty. He told me, I remember, that the only sensation he felt was one of

absolute physical emptiness, as though the interior of his trunk were a scientific vacuum. He was a brave man too, and had distinguished himself under fire pretty often. There was something of that unpleasant sensation in the criminal's interior when at last a hand was laid upon him and he was told to rise and mount a set of corkscrew steps which led from the waiting-chamber of justice into the hall itself. The hall of justice was small and shabby, and there were fifty or sixty people packed into it like herrings in a barrel. There were hundreds more outside eager for a look at *him*, doomed for the present to be disappointed. The prisoner was a good-looking young fellow, tall, straight, and broad-shouldered, scrupulously dressed and groomed. He smoothed his silky moustache nervously with his ringed hand, and stood squarely there, at military ease. Nobody at first looking at him thought him likely to be guilty. The women who were squeezed in with the other spectators were with him every one.

The proceedings were formal, and neces-

sarily incomplete. George Bushell, sworn, made his statement, denying the validity of the cheque, and producing the crumpled scraps he had discovered. The bank manager, sworn, made *his* statement, and proved that the prisoner had himself cashed the cheque. He admitted that he had noticed nothing suspicious or peculiar in Mr. Banks's demeanour. —Nothing.

Had the prisoner anything to say in answer to the charge? He need say nothing. Anything he did say would be taken down. The case could not be dealt with there, and would have to go for trial.

George answered in a voice which the local reporter called 'unmoved,' though to himself it sounded as if somebody else were speaking.

'I am perfectly innocent of the charge brought against me. I received the cheque from Mr. Bushell's own hands, and paid the money over to him on his return from London. I am at a loss to understand the accusation, unless it has been brought forward with the

diabolical intention of ruining an innocent man.'

Suddenly a heart had found its way into the internal vacuum, and it beat madly at the prisoner's side. Could the people hear it? There was such a clamour of excited tongues when the prisoner had made this speech, that the officials ejected half a dozen of the spectators, and lodged them on the packed and crowded stairs before silence was restored.

'That is one of two things, Mr. Banks,' said the magistrate. 'It is either a very complete defence, or a very foolish one. If it is not true, nothing could tell more heavily against you than such a defence.'

'It is true,' said the prisoner, and nine out of ten believed him for the moment.

The case, said the magistrate, must be remanded until Wednesday. In the meantime the police would make all inquiry after the whereabouts of the notes in which the cheque had been paid. The bank manager had with him a memorandum of the notes, and, being again put into the box, swore to its accuracy.

The prisoner was removed, no bail being offered or demanded. The day's work was over, and the crowd dispersed. An hour later, the news flew through the town that more than half the notes were traced. Curtice the solicitor had paid them into the bank the day after that on which they had been drawn, and being interrogated, had declared that the prisoner had handed them to him in satisfaction of an account long overdue.

Even in the popular mind, impressed as it had been by the firmness of the prisoner's counter-accusation against his employer, George's position began to look fishy.

The Saracen stood all that day with bolted doors, shuttered windows, and down-drawn blinds. Dinah would have fain left the house on her own mission, but Daniel, who by this time knew the disgrace which had fallen upon him, had sternly forbidden her, and had indeed driven her to her room and locked her in there with unwonted imprecations.

I do not believe that there is any criminally-minded cur alive who would not deny himself

his crime, if he could see the brood that it is sure to bear.

Even public gossip, which is irreverent enough, and even private spite, which is upon occasion cruel, spare something, and Ethel heard no word of the dreadful tidings of her lover's wickedness. But the daily newspaper spares nobody, and in its columns she read the tale. And how, will you ask, did she accept the story? How should she accept it, but like the loyal and true-hearted maid she was, with passionate faith in her lover, and unmeasured defiance and scorn for his accuser! It never entered into her heart for a fraction of a second to believe him guilty. Guilty? He—her lover? The policeman who arrested him, the magistrate who committed him, the people who looked on and listened were sunk beneath the lowest reach of contemptuous indignation, not to know, not to see at a glance, that he was and must be innocent.

And so, not merely thinking him guiltless, but feeling as persuaded of his honour as if she herself had held it in her keeping, she turned

about to see in what way she could be of service to him. She was quick to see and understand anything set before her, and though she was as ignorant of legal matters as most women are, it seemed strange to her that nobody should have spoken for him. Surely he should have had a lawyer to defend him, but the stupidities had only arrested him the day before, and were bent, apparently, on affording him as little chance as possible for the proof of his transparent innocence. The man of business who had made her father's will, and who still managed such small legal concerns as Mrs. Donne was afflicted with, lived thirty miles away, and she knew no other lawyer. Yes—there was Mr. Keen, but she did not think well of Mr. Keen's spiritual prospects, and she had begged George to cease to associate with him. There were other lawyers to be had, and she could easily find them. But then came the question of money. She had heard it said emphatically that lawyers, above all men, demanded that their services should be paid for. That was Uncle Borge's verdict, and Uncle Borge

was of a decidedly litigious character—and had experience.

There was the money George had given her. For such a purpose as she had in mind it was surely righteous to use that. She took the bundle of notes from their hiding-place, slipped them into her bosom, dressed and set out upon her walk. The roads were miry, but the day was bright and clear, freshened with recent rains. Ethel was a good pedestrian, as a farmer's daughter should be, and the four miles were not much to her, animated by such a purpose as she bore.

At the edge of the town she encountered an undersized coaly man in very heavy and very dirty flannel. Any lady strange to the district might have been excused if the coaly man's exterior had deterred her from addressing him. But Ethel approached him without any thought of his appearance.

‘Can you direct me to a lawyer's office?’ she asked.

‘Why, yis, miss,’ said Mr. Bowker. ‘There's Mr. Keen's office roun' the corner. It's nine

or ten housen up wi' a brass plaät o' the door.'

'Do you know another lawyer?' she asked. She had an objection to consulting Mr. Keen.

Mr. Bowker did know of another lawyer, as it happened, and volunteered to show the way.

'I need not trouble you,' said the girl with a sort of sad graciousness.

'Trouble!' said Mr. Bowker, with great gallantry. 'It's no trouble to do a turn for a good-lookin' lady. This way, miss, if yo' please.'

Ethel followed perforce, and Mr. Bowker led her by intricate ways to the office of a Mr. Packmore, an elderly conveyancer, who had no more to do with criminal legalities than I have. But he was able to tell her that Mr. John Keen had undertaken the defence of the prisoner; and so fate seemed to push her towards Mr. John Keen in spite of herself. Mr. Bowker had waited outside, and now

led her back again, declining her proffered gratuity.

‘Pray take it,’ said Ethel.

‘No, miss, thank you,’ answered William ;
‘you do’t look the sort to want to mek a mon
feel ashaämed of himsen.’

Ethel withdrew the proffered florin swiftly,
with a little blush.

‘I am very much obliged to you,’ she said.

‘Not a bit on it,’ protested Mr. Bowker.
‘I do’t git the chance to tak’ a walk wi’ a young
lady every day. Let alone a nice-looking un,’
he added, fearing lest the compliment might
seem feebly expressed without that addendum.

Sad as she was, she could scarcely thank
him with less than a smile. William grinned
and ducked responsive.

Mr. Keen was at home and would receive
Miss Donne. He rose when she entered, and
pushed his long hair back with both hands,
looking at her earnestly and with evident
sadness.

‘I think,’ he began, ‘that I can guess the
object of your visit.’

‘I am told,’ she answered, ‘that you are defending Mr. Banks.’ John nodded miserably, and shifted his papers to and fro upon his desk. ‘I did not know,’ she went on, ‘until this morning that any charge had been preferred against him. But I saw from the newspaper that he had no lawyer, and I came to engage one. Did he send for you?’

‘No,’ said John unwillingly, ‘not exactly. We were old school-fellows, and his people seemed to desert him, and I thought——’

His voice trailed off, and he left the sentence unfinished.

‘Thank you, Mr. Keen,’ said Ethel, rising from her chair and impulsively holding out her hand. ‘Any one who has known him can tell how ridiculous the accusation is.’

John took her hand in an embarrassed way, and with embarrassment released it.

‘We must do our best,’ he said, with a dismal attempt at cheerfulness.

‘If I wanted an argument for his innocence of such a shameful crime,’ said Ethel, reseating herself—‘and I certainly don’t want anything

of the sort—I have it with me now. Before a man commits a crime he must have a motive for it. George was saving money, and had a considerable sum in his possession at the very time when he is said to have forged this cheque.’ She spoke with such an assured and quiet scorn that John Keen’s heart ached for her. But he had his wits about him, too.

‘Come,’ he said, brightening a little, ‘that is something in his favour, if we can prove it.’ He knew his client pretty thoroughly, and thought him guilty, but there was a chance that his story of a conspiracy was true, after all, though the chance was certainly one of the slenderest.

‘I can prove it,’ said Ethel quietly. She disliked this young man again, because he was not as certain of her lover’s innocence as she was. ‘You know already,’ she went on, ‘that Mr. Banks and I were engaged to be married.’ That was a theme about which on common occasions Ethel would not have spoken to anybody except her mother and her lover, but she spoke of it now as a matter of course, and with

no confusion. John nodded again. Her pride in George and her certainty of him were troublesome to his spirit, for he himself was in love with her with all his heart, and it was bitter, to be sure, that she had so much to suffer. 'Looking forward to that, she said, 'he gave me this money—a hundred and ten pounds—to keep for him.' She laid the bundle of notes upon the table, and John reached out for it. This cast a curious light upon the case, he thought; but when once he had unfolded the notes, he fell back in his official arm-chair and looked at her with so amazed and stricken a countenance that she arose to her feet and looked back at him as if his sorrow and surprise had been an epidemic, and she in a flash of time had caught it.

'Great heaven!' he gasped, and, rising, held out the notes at arm's length. 'Do you tell me, Miss Donne, that George Banks gave *you* these?'

'Yes,' she answered boldly, though amazed. He let them fall to the table, his arm dropped heavily to his side, and he fell back into his

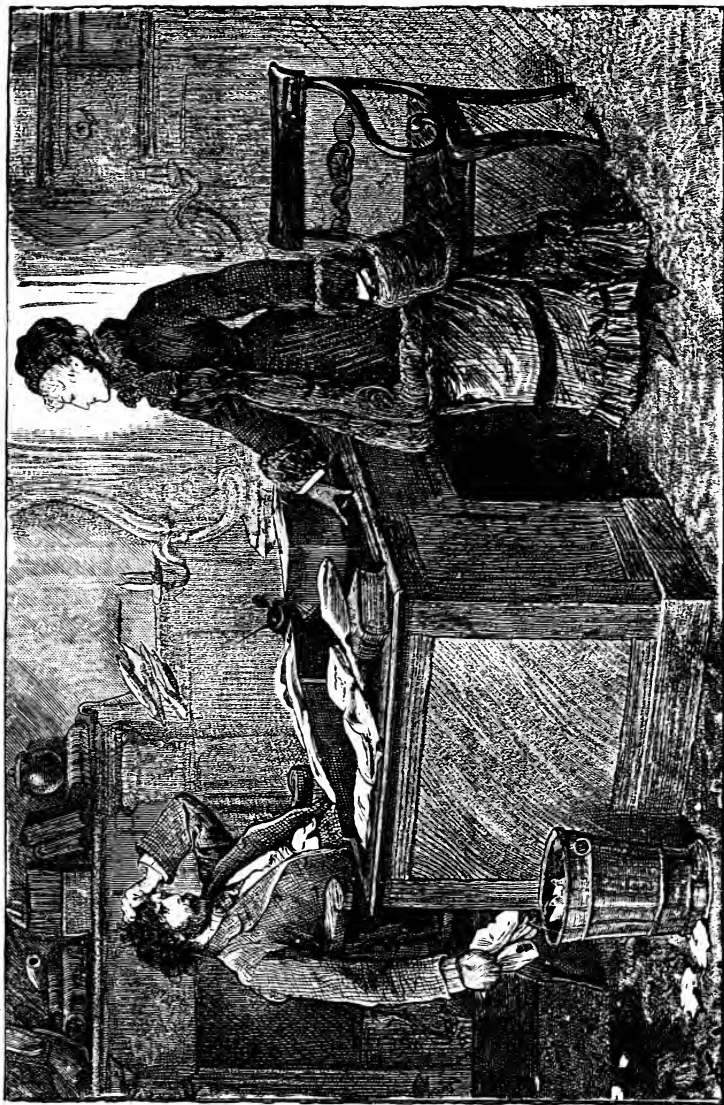
seat again limply ; then rising on a sudden, he paced the room, and pulled at his long hair with both hands. At this she regarded him with increased wonder, following him with her eyes until, with a final wrench at his hair, he threw himself bodily into the seat he had just quitted, and glared at her like one distraught. 'What is it, Mr. Keen?' she asked, not without a tone of contempt in her voice.

'Miss Donne,' protested the young lawyer earnestly, 'my heart bleeds for you!' She faced him bravely, without a word, waiting for him. 'I must tell you what it will pain you terribly to know.'

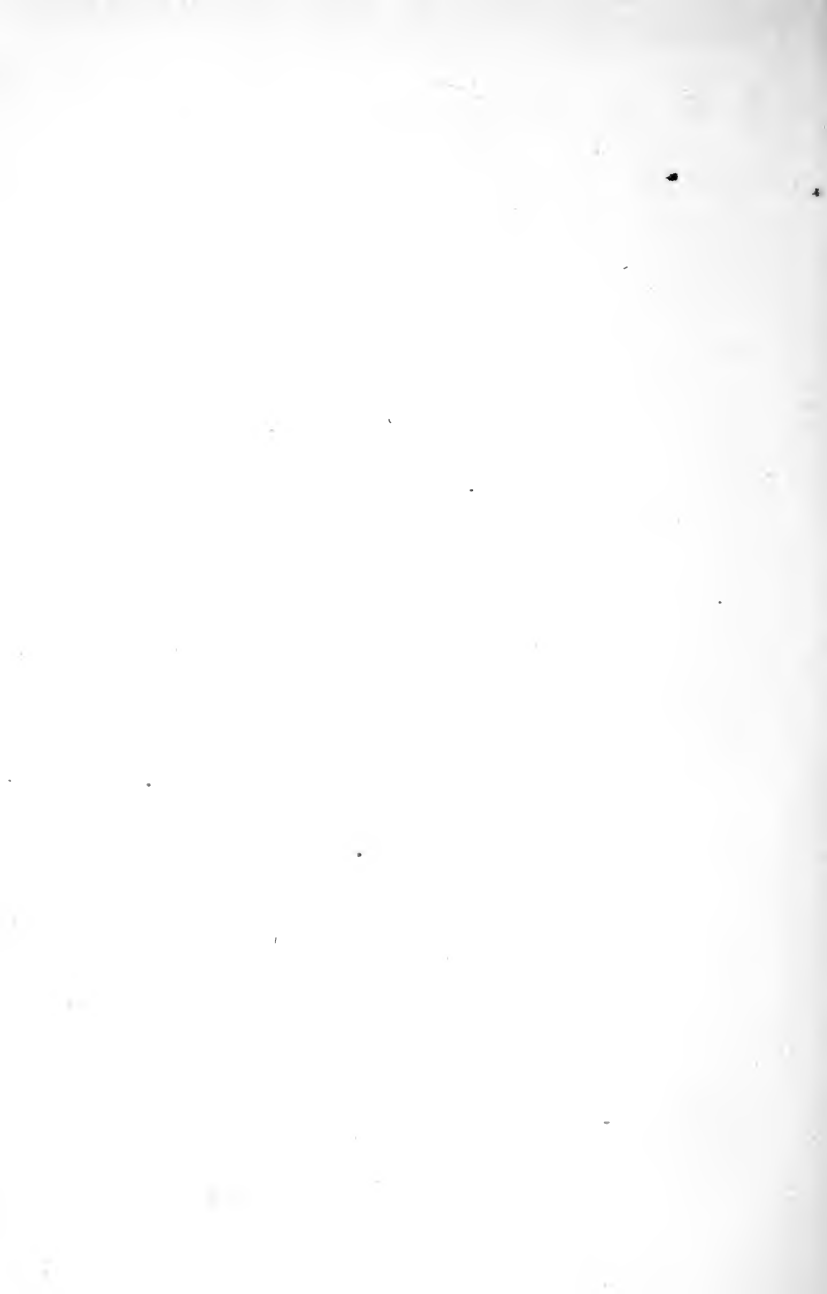
'Tell me,' she said steadfastly, seeing that he faltered.

'This,' he said, taking up the bundle of notes from the table and dropping it again, 'was all that was wanted finally to prove his guilt. The villain!' he muttered, grinding his teeth and starting to his feet again.

'Explain yourself,' she answered, steadfast still. All colour had flown from her face except for one spot on either cheek, and her



'He glared at her like one distraught.'



fine nostrils were a little dinted, but her eyes glittered with a light which under some circumstances would have looked dangerous.

‘I would as soon be shot as do it,’ said the miserable John; ‘but it has to be done. These are the circumstances:—Mr. Bushell charges the prisoner with forgery. The prisoner answers that he received the cheque from Mr. Bushell, cashed it for him at the bank, and paid the money into his hands. The people at the bank keep a register of the number of all notes paid out and received; they supply the police with a copy of that register in this particular case, and of course it becomes the duty of the police to trace the notes and see whose hands they pass through. Now, here’—he handed her a slip of paper from a pigeon-hole in his desk—‘here is a copy of the bank manager’s memorandum. Look at the notes yourself, Miss Donne—I hate myself for telling you!—and you will see that you have had put into your innocent hands a portion of the forger’s gains. And now the murder’s out!’

The murder was out indeed. In the face of such evidence, faith was useless. There was no crevice, in the certainty which prisoned her, through which the loyalest doubt of love could struggle. Love's dream was over, and love's gilded idol lay shattered at her feet. The amazed contempt and scorn with which she had read the story of the accusation of her lover, the loyalty with which she would have clung to him against all the evidence the wide world could bring, lent a doubled and redoubled force to the blow which fell upon her. She would have taken him to her true breast, against the jeers of a universe, whilst she knew him to be true. For she had not merely thought him honest, believed him honest—she *knew* him to be honest, as only love knows love; and after all, his truth was a lie, and the gift of his love a shame from which no years or tears could cleanse her.

I will not try beyond this to tell you how she suffered.

It was decided, before that terrible interview closed, that there was but one thing to

be done with the knowledge John Keen had acquired—to submit it to the authorities. And so on Wednesday the sight-seers at the police-court beheld the outside of as great a tragedy as ever a woman's heart played a part in. Curtice got up and told his tale, and the prisoner, pallid and desperate, gave him the lie.

Then Ethel Donne appeared in the witness-box, and the coward's heart stood still.

Dinah was in the court, resolved to tell her story to the magistrate. For Daniel, after his first rage, had fallen into lethargy, and had let her have her way, not even understanding the tale she told him with so many fawning, piteous caresses and such tears of heartbreak. John Keen, to the general surprise, had thrown up the case for the defence, but sat there in court with a grey, hard face, and never once looked from the prisoner's eyes. This persistent regard drew a shifty glance now and again from George, but John's aspect never changed. The angry loathing in it might have disconcerted even an honourable man.

Ethel, gently handled by the magistrate,

told her story. What it cost to tell it can never be known. Dinah heard it, and began to hate her child.

‘Have you any question to ask *this* witness, prisoner?’ Thus Sir Sydney Cheston, magistrate.

The human rat in a corner shrieked,

‘It’s false! It’s a vile conspiracy!’

There rose a cry of indignation from the little crowd in the packed court.

‘The child I bore!’ groaned Dinah. None heard the words but Ethel; for Dinah, as she spoke them, rose beside the witness-box and stretched out her arms as if to save the girl from this last and cruellest blow. Ethel turned to her embrace and fainted on that sheltering bosom.

CHAPTER XIII.

DOUBT is not incompatible with belief, after all. A man may believe a thing pretty firmly and yet have his misgivings about it. Old George believed that Dinah had lied to him, and having an interest in that belief, he gave it all the nourishment he had to give. But he felt like one who walks on unsafe ground, who cannot leave the place, and has no clue to the divination of the moment when the mine may burst. A sensation not wholly comfortable, as any successful schemer may believe.

The Rightful Heir was committed to take his trial, and the Wrongful Heir was bound over to appear against him. Ethel also was bound over to appear, and waited for the day with every hour a dull agony. It came at last, and Master George, following his own wise maxim

of in for a penny in for a pound, stuck to his tale of a conspiracy. He was without defence, cross-examined no witnesses, but made his simple and despairing plaint to a jury convinced of his guilt and a judge whom his base protestations made angry. When Ethel had recovered from her swoon in the police court, her deposition was brought to her to be signed, and the intelligent and active officer whose duty it was to see that she signed it, guided her weak and shaking fingers with such result that her signature looked like that of Guy Fawkes after the rack. The judge had read the depositions and had seen the signature, and it had got somehow into the judicial mind that the prisoner was going to marry socially beneath him. When, therefore, the name of Ethel Donne was called aloud, and the girl stepped into the witness-box, his lordship was very strongly surprised and favourably impressed by her appearance. When she told anew the story of the false trust her lover had invested in her hands, the hardened official heart began to discern a tragedy unusually terrible even for

his experience. George stuck to his colours, and proclaimed himself once more a maligned and persecuted character, the victim of an unheard-of conspiracy. The jury, without leaving the box, found him guilty, and his lordship (frostedly remarking that if the prisoner had set up another sort of defence he might have been let off more lightly, in consideration of his youth, his social condition, and the good prospects he had ruined) sentenced him to two years' imprisonment. There was scarcely a lighter heart that day in Stafford town than old George's. The burden of fear which had lain upon him for weeks past fell away and left him free—free at least for two years, and two years give time enough even for the slowest man to turn about in. And apart from that, Dinah's silence argued the whole thing a lie, so far as her story of the marriage was concerned. Beyond the marriage he had no need to trouble himself, and he began to dismiss even the remotest fear of that from his mind.

He dined at the Swan, took his way home by train, and for a day or two he lived on in

the usual way, until a little incident led to a big one, and he began again to be terribly afraid—much more afraid, indeed, than before.

It happened in this wise. His housekeeper brought him every week a list of the house expenses, and he had been in the habit of checking this to the last farthing with his own hand, even whilst he had resigned the almost entire care of his vast business concerns to the scoundrel who had at last forged his name. She brought in the list now a day or two after the trial, and George, sitting down to consider it, arrived at the conclusion that cheese, candles, tea, coffee, butter, and other articles of household use were going faster than they should do. He was in a more than commonly grudging humour, and there was a sum of two hundred pounds to be made up somehow by squeezing something or somebody. He rang for his housekeeper.

‘Look here!’ he said, when she reappeared in answer to his summons; ‘I’m a-being robbed right an’ left, I am. I shan’t stand it, Mrs. Bullus, an’ you’d better mek your mind

up to that at once. Here's two pound of butter gone since last Saturday, an' a pound an' a half o' candles. An' as for tea an' coffee, why, you might swim in 'em, to look at these here accounts. Now, I've been done pretty smart a'ready, an' it's the fust time, an' it'll be the last—mind what I'm a-tellin' you.'

'I'm sure, sir,' said Mrs. Bullus, in some wrath, 'as nobody's got cause to say a word again' me on that count. I've been a honest woman all my days, an' if you're sayin' anythin' again' me, you'll have to prove your words. For, what though I'm poor, I ain't that speritless to endure it.'

George was getting to be querulous as he grew old, and that matter of the forgery had set his temper's teeth on edge so thoroughly that small things jarred him.

'D'ye call this here item right?' he asked, almost fiercely. 'Eight an' sixpence for tea an' coffee in a week for three people, an' one on 'em just fetched new out of the workus!'

Mr. Bushell's maid-of-all-work was but newly emancipated from the discipline of the

Bastille, as they call the workhouse in those parts, and was therefore naturally supposed to be able to content herself on a moderate diet.

‘Well, it does seem a large sum, sir,’ the housekeeper admitted.

‘Why, it couldn’t ha’ come about at all,’ cried the old man, ‘onless I was a-bein’ robbed again. Where’s that little hussey of a Jane? Fetch her here. I’ll get at the bottom o’ this one way or another.’

‘Jane’s gone up to Mrs. Bunch’s to borrow a strainer. There ain’t a si’ fit to use in the wull house, an’ that’s as true as I’m a standin’ here if I should never speak another word, an’ the Lord A’mighty knows it.’

It was Mrs. Bullus’s favourite method of warfare to carry the fighting into the enemy’s country in this wise whenever she and her master held a dispute together.

‘Hold your tongue, woman,’ said George savagely. ‘An’ when that little trollop comes in again—Here, niver mind waitin’ for that. You come wi’ me, an’ I’ll have a look at her box now this minute, an’ if I find anything theer as

don't belong to her, I'll send her to Stafford Jail as sure as I'm alive. Come along.'

'Fie for shame, master,' said Mrs. Bullus. 'I wouldn't be that suspicious-like, not to have ivery hair o' my head hung wi' gold. That I wouldn't.'

'Come wi me!' said her master, so angrily that, privileged as long service had seemed to make her, she dare answer him no further. George Bushell led the way, and the woman, with an expression of countenance which appeared to presage a jest of some sort, followed. The old man walked to the top of the house and entered a little bare room in the attic. He glared round him in rage and amazement, seeing nothing but the bare walls and the floor, on which there was a great patch of wet corresponding to another patch in the plastered ceiling.

'Why, what's this?' he called to the house-keeper.

'This is the room Jane slep' in up till last We'nsday was a week,' the woman answered with much seriousness. 'But it's been a-rainin'

so, an' the roof's that bad, her had to move her bed into the lumber room.'

'Why couldn't you ha' tode me that afore,' asked George, 'i'stead o' bringin' me a-trapesin' all the way up here?'

'You said, "Come along of me,"' the housekeeper answered, and grinned broadly all over her Black Country countenance as her master, growling, led the way downstairs again. The room he next entered was half filled with odds and ends of furniture, broken chairs, crippled tables, and the like, and in one corner stood a high-shouldered wardrobe, which had once made part of the furniture of his brother Joseph's bedroom. When old Joe died, brother George had laid hands upon everything, even upon those things which were of no use to him. 'Keep a thing long enough, an' you'll find a use for it,' was one of George's constantly quoted aphorisms. But he had never dreamed of keeping this old wardrobe for such a use as at length he found in it.

It may go without saying that the dull schemer had long ceased to have any remorse

about young Joe, or the method by which he himself had acquired young Joe's fortune. At a very little distance of time the cheque he had given to his nephew had begun in memory to communicate a sense of warmth to his heart, and he thought the gift an almost unexampled stroke of generosity. Lifeless things which had once belonged to the brother and sister whose hearts he helped to break were not likely to touch him very keenly at any time, and after these years were scarcely likely to remind him at all of their first owners. He was absolutely unaffected by them, and had no present memory of Joseph and Rebecca nor any thought about them.

‘Turn the things out o’ that theer box,’ said George. ‘I’ll see who’s a-thievin’ i’ *my* house.’

There was not much in the box, and if anything in it had been stolen, it had certainly not been from old George.

‘This is a nice sort o’ place to hide things in,’ said he, whilst the housekeeper loosely tumbled the things back into the meagre box.

He went, stepping gingerly between broken chairs and the other lumber with which the corner was filled, towards the wardrobe. The door had long since lost its handle, but he clawed it open, and rapped out a good round oath, for there at the bottom of the wardrobe lay a score or two of little packages, mere newspaper screws, and on these fell the man who had inherited a quarter of a million of money and had doubled it. Unfolding them one by one, he displayed their contents to the housekeeper with a suppressed severity of passion worthy of a loftier cause. In one was an ounce of cheese, in another a little bit of butter, in a third a table-spoonful of coffee, in a fourth a pinch or two of moist sugar. And as the owner of half a million sterling opened up to the housekeeper's vision this hidden stolen treasure, the peccant Jane, who had come into the house by the back way, bounced into the room and stood guiltily transfixed before the accusing eyes of her master.

‘Mrs. Bullus,’ said old George, regarding

the criminal with Rhadamanthine severity, 'fetch a policeman.'

The wretched detected one fell upon her knees before him with a countenance of imploring agony.

'It was my mother as axed me to do it,' she declared.

'Fetch a policeman,' said George again, and Mrs. Bullus, with no intention of obeying, left the room. The master of the house went on opening the little packages, and spread them all out before the miserable Jane. 'This is wheer my household provisions has been a-going to, is it!—Eh?' said he with withering sarcasm. 'How many shillin'-worths of my property have you stole? Answer me that this minute. Wheer's that policeman, Mrs. Bullus?'

'D'ye mind comin' here a minute, master?' asked the housekeeper, reappearing. George picked his way through the débris of the corner and joined the woman outside.

'You don't r'aly want me to fetch a pleece-man, do you?' she asked.

‘Yis, I do,’ said George; but no man is insensible to the feelings of other people, and he hastened to add: ‘I want to gi’e the young madam a good fright.’

‘Yes, sir,’ said the housekeeper in a louder tone; ‘the pleeceman’ll be here in a minute.’

Old George went heavily back into the lumber-room. The criminal was in a condition of abject terror, boo-hooing on the floor. Her employer, disregarding her, passed once more to the wardrobe.

‘Is there anythin’ else you’ve hid here, you wicked gell?’ he demanded, poking about in the darker corners. ‘Why, what’s this? Have you been a-tryin’ to steal a coat o’ mine?’ The garment he had in his hand was none of his, as the glance of a moment told him. It was old and mildewed, and almost rotten in places, and it felt moist in his hand. A certain musty smell with which his nostrils had been acquainted ever since his entry to the room, seemed now to be chiefly traceable to this shabby and decayed old coat.

The blubbering little culprit was forgotten.



'Have you been a-tryin' to steal a coat o' mine?'



George had heard the manner of his sister-in-law's death, and had been told of her last words.

It was Joseph's Coat.

He held the coat in his hand, and knew it almost at a glance. He walked into his own room with it, threw it into a chair, and stood staring at it for a full minute. There were few men less likely be affected by the sight of any worthless relic such as this, but possibly it hit him as it did because it *was* such a trifle, and because he had found it after such a lapse of years. A greater thing arising sooner might have passed him by.

'It's made me feel moist all o'er,' said he, rubbing the palm of the hand in which he had carried it against his own coat, to get rid of the feel of the discovered garment. 'Eh dear!' And he stared at the coat, and went off into reverie. 'I reckon,' he said after a time, 'as he's been dead these 'ears and 'ears. It feels as if he had been.'

He seemed reluctant to touch the coat again, for he put his hand out towards it once

or twice, and drew it back. But laying hold of it at last, he took a step to the door, as if intending to return it to the place from which he had taken it, but as he did so he stopped short, dropped the garment upon the table, and felt a part of it with his hand.

‘Theer’s somethin’ i’ the linin’,” he said slowly. ‘A bit o’ paper o’ some sort.’ The lining was so old and rotten that he tore it open easily with his fingers, and there, sure enough, was a scrap of paper. George put on his glasses and looked at it. No change in face or attitude gave notice of the shock it brought him to read the little document he held. Yet it was nothing less than a copy of the certifica’ of marriage between Joseph Bushell, bac’ elor, and Dinah Banks, spinster.

Then, Dinah’s story of the marriage had not been a lie, after all! Errant Joe had left a rightful heir behind him!

The first conscious and distinct feeling he had was one of relief that this discovery had not been made before George had proved himself unworthy. It is always pleasanter to

escape from being a scoundrel than to be one, and now old George was armed in honesty for two years at least. For two years he could be honest and yet hold the money. Any question of becoming *dishonest* and still holding the money might reasonably be deferred until the time came.

For two years he could be honest and yet hold the money. And yet he began to doubt that postulate. The money had never belonged to young George as yet, but it undoubtedly did belong now, and had belonged, ever since old Joe's death, to Dinah, young Joe's wedded wife. Well, there was some comfort there. She had voluntarily resigned it all this time, and had, indeed, when he sued for mercy for her son, expressly disowned all desire to claim it.

'Her don't want it,' mused old George. 'Said so with her own lips. It don't belong to him not till her's dead, an' if it belonged to him now he's a felon.' He could argue well on the side of justice, for he went on—'An' if he signed his own name, he didn't know it, an'

it was a felonious intention. I've heard that on the bench many a time. What's to be looked at is the intention. It never was i' *my* mind for a minute to swindle anybody. I gave a hunderd pound to my young neveu Joseph as I've never seen again from that day to this. If he'd ha' come again, an' ha' took everythin', could I ha' said to him, "Joseph, you owe me a hunderd pound"? Now, could I? Could I ha' been that mean as to ha' said it?'

He felt magnanimously disdainful at the thought.

'Her must ha' been an uncommon foolish sort o' woman to ha' laid out of her money all these 'ears for want of a scrap like this,' said the considerate George with the certificate held between his plump thumb and finger. 'But sence her has laid out of it, an'—why—I'll——'

He did not complete the sentence, but he took the poker in his disengaged hand, hollowed out the fire, put the certificate gently into the hollow, and beat down the glowing coals upon it. As he did so, his brother's latest action came into his mind. Not that the burning of

the will had made any difference in his position, or could have done, any more than now the destruction of the marriage certificate made ; but the two things somehow associated themselves together. The burning of the will had heralded in a tenancy of five-and-twenty years : the destruction of the certificate might, for anything he could tell, be as good an omen.

Whilst he still stood idly beating at the coals with the poker, a tap came to the door.

‘Come in!’ cried he, and the housekeeper entered.

‘What am I to do along o’ Jane, master?’ she inquired.

Mr. Bushell had forgotten the peccant maid, but a flush of virtuous heat touched him at the mention of her.

‘Mek the baggage pack her things up and be off at once,’ he answered. ‘I’ll have no roguery i’ *this* house, if I can help it.’

‘Her’s a-cryin’ fit to split, master,’ said the housekeeper. ‘Her swears her mother set her on to it, and says her’ll never do it again. I can allays keep a look on her.’

‘Send her off,’ said George.

‘Her’s afraid to go hum,’ the housekeeper pleaded. ‘Best let her stop, master. Her comes cheaper than a bigger gell would, an’ I’ll keep a look on her.’

There was a consideration there which touched old George. Give him the benefit of the doubt, and say it was pity.

‘I’ll tek a day or two to think it over,’ he responded, and the housekeeper was about to retire, when she saw the decayed and mildewed old coat lying on the table.

‘Why, master,’ she said, advancing towards it, ‘whatever do you mean by keepin’ a rag like that i’ the parlour, a-makin’ a litter?’

‘Leave it alone,’ cried George. ‘I want it.’ He was never unwilling to show a softer side to his nature, when he could do so inexpensively. ‘That garmint,’ he proceeded, ‘is th’ o’ny one thing as is left in the wull wide world of a poor nevew of mine. My eldest brother’s o’ny son he was, an’ that’s his coat I just found. I’ll keep it.’

‘Why, that’d be young Mister Joseph as

run away from hum when I was a gell,' said the housekeeper. 'More than twenty 'ear ago.'

'Five-an'-twenty,' said old George. 'Yes: I'll keep it. You go an' frighten that little trollop's life out. Tell her I'll ha' no mercy on her next time if ever her does such a thing again. I'll ha' nobody but upright folks i' *my* house, Mrs. Bullus.'

The housekeeper retired, and having soothed Jane with promises of a public hanging in case of any renewal of her peccadilloes, she mused upon her master.

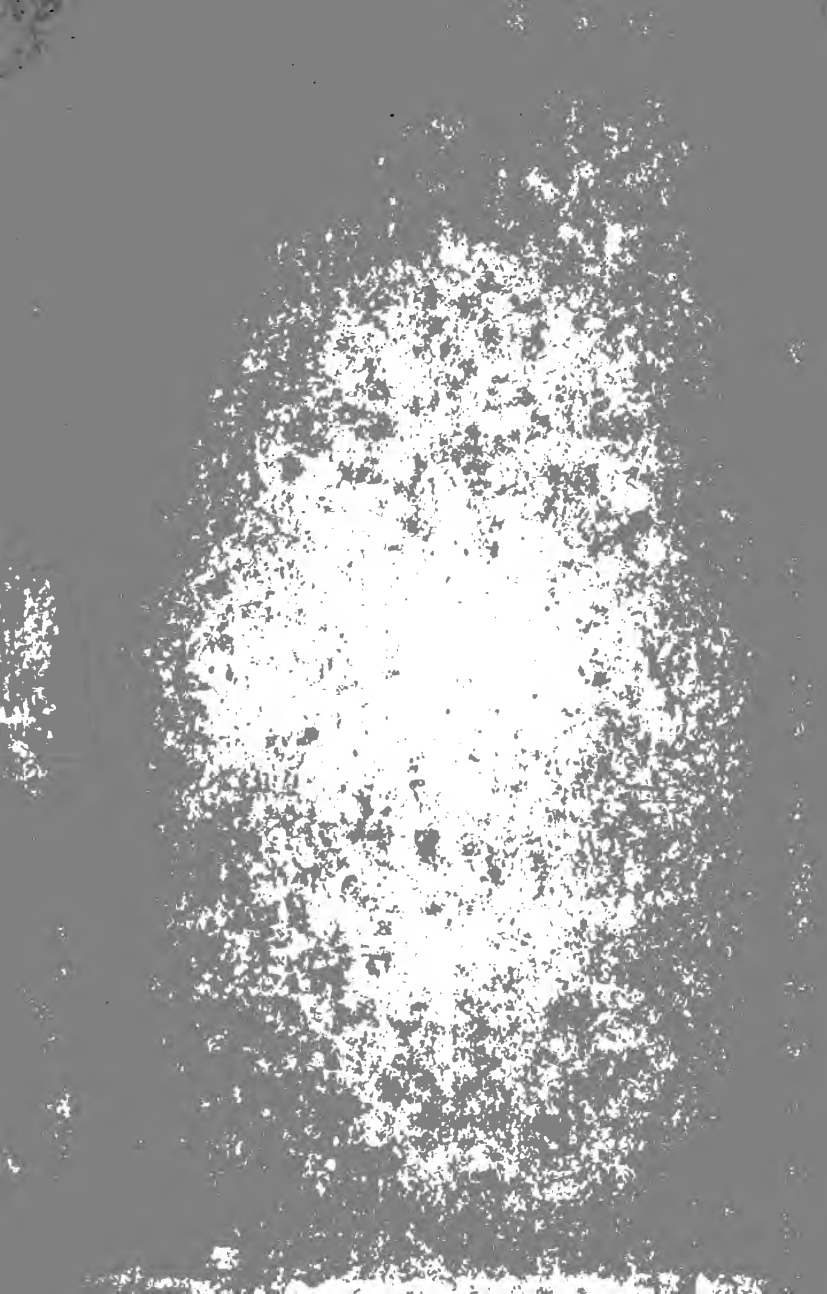
'He's hard to get on wi',' she concluded, 'but I think he's main true at bottom. An' anyhow he does abhor a thief, an' so do I.'

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

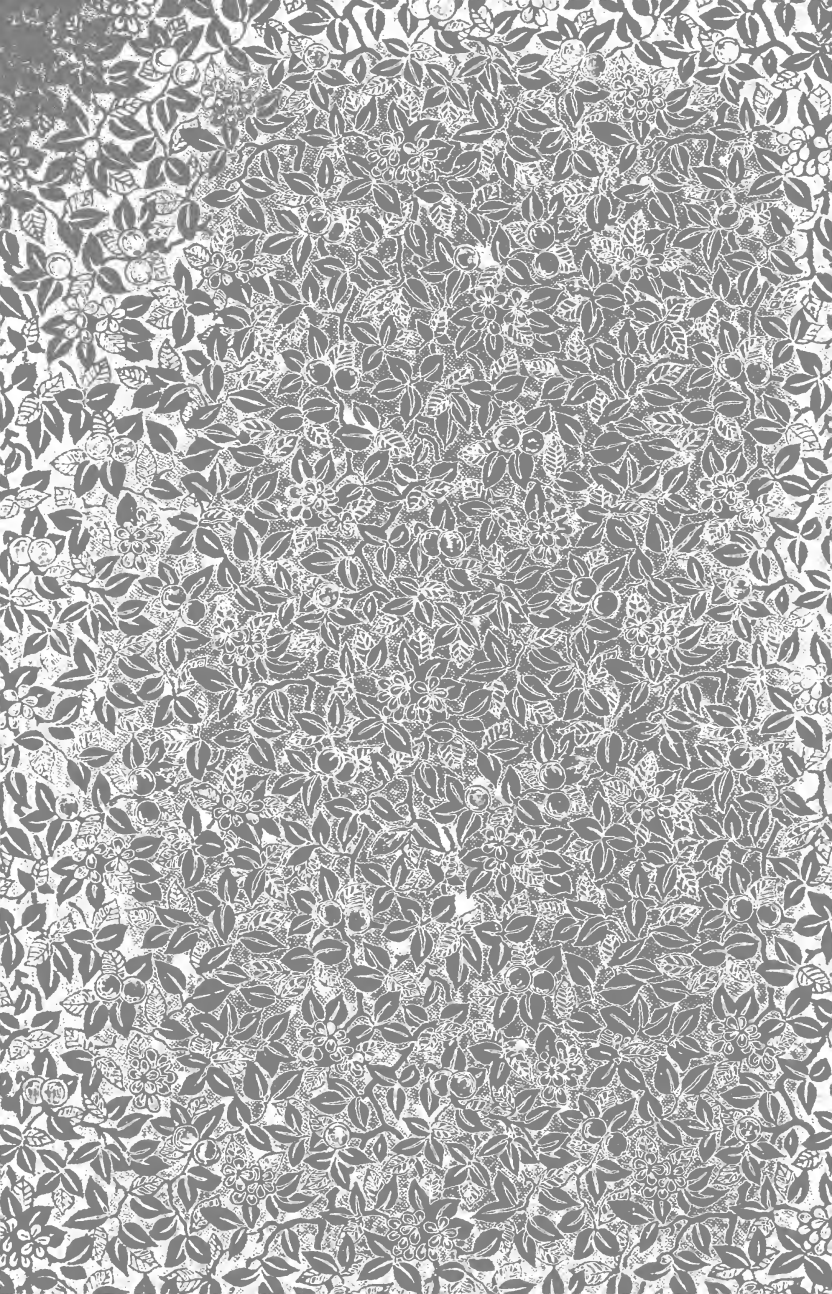












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